

RETRO
RAMPAGE
WREAKED!

|||||ZX SPECTRUM|||||

"IT LIVES!!!"

OH
THE
HUMANITY!



ZX SPECTRUM – IT LIVES!!! Presents

An A to Z of

CURIOUSITIES OF THE MODERN AGE

INTRODUCTION

Spectrum games are a curious lot, as are Spectrum programmers and gamers, it's hard to deny. Making a game these days involves hundreds and thousands of people, and some impressive work they do too. But back in the crazy '80s, most games were made by one guy on his tod (*not all by the same guy, but you know what I mean*) and so any bizarre ideas he happened to have thought up when he'd had a few, invariably made it to the final cut without any censorship or restrictions at all. Hence the madcap adventures of the likes of Miner Willy, Magic Knight, Eric from Skool Daze and Trashman _____ (*please insert your name*).

If you wanted to make a game about a binman nowadays, he'd have to have a skills tree to encompass all the many and varied aspects of the job, plus a stealth mode and a utility belt with a grapple and other handy gadgets. Maybe the ability to double-jump and fast travel to different streets and neighbourhoods. And once you've dispatched all your side quests, usually fetching multiple objects on one side of town for lazy wasters on the exact opposite side of town, while fending off over-amorous customers and their uber-bitey dogs, you might eventually get to complete the game. And the DLC of course.

But which ending will you get? Will it be the good ending (*bins emptied, cuppa quaffed, paid in full*), the so-so ending (*some rubbish spilled, cuppa gone cold, got paid but some deductions for carelessness*) or the bad ending (*rubbish everywhere, drink knocked over, fired from job and subsequent lifetime of poverty and alcohol abuse*).

Irregardless, the point of this here book is to embrace both the old and the new, and showcase the most eccentric modern Spectral games that could be found, in accordance with the unnecessarily strict framework of the English alphabet. They vary in curiosity from a bit odd to completely hatstand, but I believe all are well worth a play, and make for a colourful celebration of the unique nature of the humble li'l computer we call '*The Spectrum*'. Long may it reign and be bonkers!

AI

p.s. Please forgive the difference in review length between the early and late letters. I'll blame my recent hyperverbosity on old age and an increased tendency to waffle on.

CURIOS ARTWORK BY LISA WOODWORTH



Is Evil Bartender giving me the finger here?

The colourful locals egg you on. Hope they're picking up the tab



If you get the order wrong, you get sudden onset carpal tunnel syndrome, i.e. gammy hands

But if you do good, it's devil horns all the way, baby!



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: A

AZZURRO 8-BIT JAM

(Relevo Videogames, 2011)

*Here's an odd thing, a game based on a pub. Actually that's not that unusual in a sense, we did get the heavily alcohol-influenced **Tapper** and **180** for instance, but hold on. This is about a specific bar, namely the **Azzurro Rock Pub** in Bilbao, Spainland. And I'm reliably informed that there's a version of this game in the bar there too, fancy that.*

*It's a bit like **Tapper** actually, only viewed from the other, more bleary-eyed side of the bar! You have to down your shorts (drinks, that is) in the correct order and as quickly as you can, while an irresponsible drunken crowd cheers you on. And repeat until your liver explodes and everyone laughs.*

*It's a simple game made to look very attractive with its colourful cartoony graphics and some decent music, if not quite Hard Rock Cafe fare, whatever that may be – almost certainly **AC/DC**. And it's good enough fun for a while, much like drinking itself. I'm looking forward to the follow-up where you take as many drugs as you can in quick succession. Are **Cheech and Chong** available for a tie-in?*



*Naturally you go north-west, and
naturally you die*

*The usual exemplary eye candy from
Mr. Townsend here*



A DEAD END of rubble, toppled buildings and industrial detritus. A WIRE FENCE lies NW, but it looks sharp, deathly dangerous, and full of barbs and spikes. EXITS: S, and NW (don't do it, guvnor!). Command, sir?



A WIDE HIGHWAY. Corpses litter tarmacadam, many with heads ripped open, brains scooped. You smell smoke. A deep moaning echoes... zombies can smell meat. EXITS: N, E, S, W. You note - a rancid CORPSE HEAD Command, sir?

*Rancid Corpse Head? Their last album
was crap*

*I think Andy might have drawn this,
then got on the phone to Clive*



BIOHELL by SPIRAL SOFTWARE WELCOMES YOU... Written by Andy Remic (c) 2009 based on a kick-ass hardcore SF novel by Andy Remic, Published by SOLARIS BOOKS and available from all good bookshops and online retailers.

A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: B

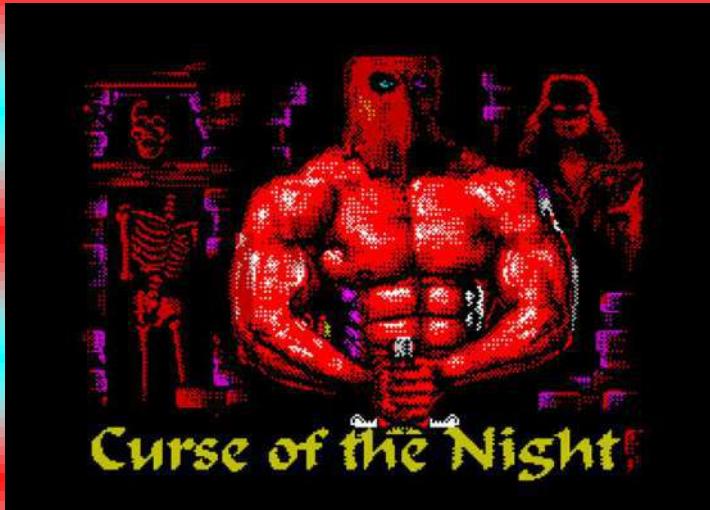
BIOHELL

(*Spiral Software, 2009*)

*A good while before Andy Remic and Clive Townsend worked together to produce the ace *The Iron Wolves*, they collaborated on this title. But Clive's involvement was limited to the impressive load screen, while Andy used G.A.C. for the rest of the game.*

It's based on his own novel about poor silly-named Franco Haggis, who as one of the Combat K squad has to battle his way through a zombie overrun wasteland to root out the cause of such wanton zombiness. Looks like humans have been messing with microscopic nanobots once too often, the fools, when will they learn?

I'm not sure about G.A.C. games myself. The screens seem to end up messy compared to Quilled affairs, and the same is true of this. The graphics are fairly simplistic but do add atmosphere, while the location descriptions tend to be a bit on the garish side. It's not the best adventure in the world but I very much like the fact that it's quite different and ambitious, so it's worth a look.



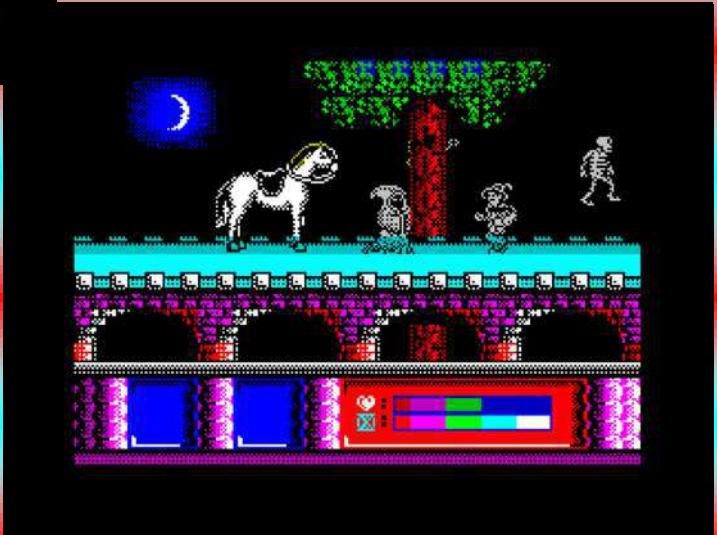
It's hard to read in the library with the undead clanking about. Shhhhhhhhhh!

Hey! Who took a sneaky photo of me posing in the mirror?



*Your faithful steed looks on and thinks
"Well blow me, a flying skeleton"*

SURPRISE! They've arranged an undead birthday party for you



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: C

CURSE OF THE NIGHT

(*Ultrasoft, 1993*)

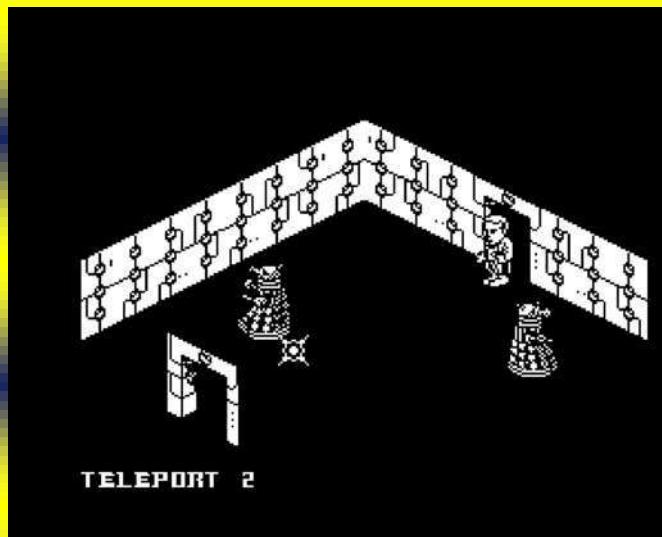
Another classic era (just) Slovakian title from *Ultrasoft* now, like *Commando 2* was, you remember? Well, I never said I was consistent, I'll throw an old foreign obscurity into the mix willingly, I'm such a tinker. *Bumfun* (cringe) resurrected this one in 2016 and from the off the presentation is rather good. A well drawn, if massively homo-erotic, load screen, amusing melting titles proclaiming this an "action romantic horror game" and some tres bon musique all the way.

A curse has taken over the kingdom, killing the locals and the king, and putting the princess in a coma. Your quest is to concoct a potion to set her right, as she's no good to you dead. Various nefarious ne'er-do-wells get in your way as you attempt this.

The graphics, colour and music are all pretty darn impressive actually, but your guy's movement is rather tardy. You can kick enemies in the head repeatedly in a weird way, but they keep coming back a bit too often and get in the way of your object juggling. As such it's a bit of a slog to get anywhere. Intriguing for a bit though.



*I still find these things terrifying, but
at least I don't hide behind the sofa
any more... mostly*

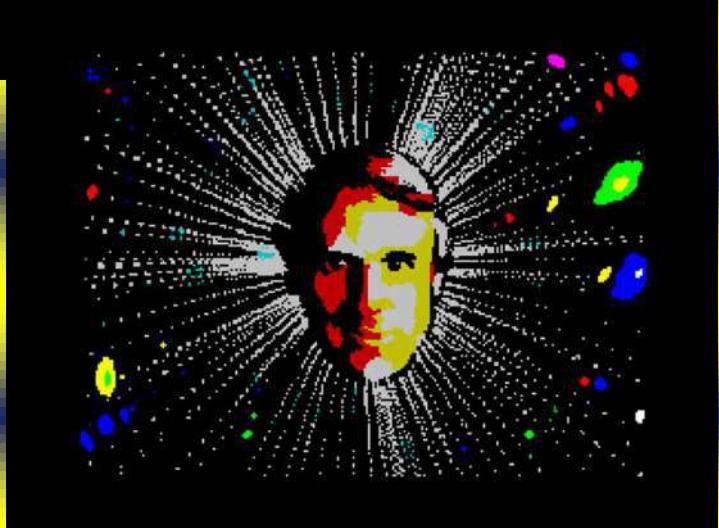


*Game Over brings a pic of everyone's
favourite doctor, Peter Davison.
Hmmmm...*

*Unlicensed by the BBC but enhanced
by The Pope. Fair 'nuff*



*Throwing things at Daleks is fun, more
of this please*



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: D

DR. WHO: SURRENDER TIME

(Errazking, 2018)

3D Game Maker by C.R.L. was possibly the most successful of the game-making utilities on the Specco (not sure that one's going to fly actually). In that some people actually managed to make the odd game with it. Unlike H.U.R.G., White Lightning, Games Designer... A.G.D. Oh alright, now I'm reaching.

Sure, the games weren't great. As far as I can tell, only *Submariner* by Atlantis and *Last Mohican* by C.R.L. themselves were released commercially. The rest were more pet projects, and much of a muchness.

But this title has a few notable features. The graphics for the introduction are great. There's very good spooky music, reminiscent of *Amaurote*, throughout, a real rarity in isometric games, with no significant slowdown. And finally you can actually chuck projectiles at those 'orrid Daleks. It comes close to breaking some new ground, but sadly most of the rooms seem kinda empty. "Nice try though, doct-oooooooorrerrrr". I was being Davros there.



Elon really needs to get his shi, sorry ship together*

Can we do this? No really, can we?



Got to love a game with a sensible scoring system. Elon's racked up a whole 14 points so far

Not sure why the fuel cells say KLOX on them. Google's not sure either



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: E

ELON M. WITH JETPACK

(Rafael Vico Costa, 2018)

Everyone loves Jetpac, n'est-ce pas? I love it so much I hate its guts. It's an obvious classic I suppose, but is it really better than The Great Space Race? There have been numerous alternative versions over the years, mostly on PC, but here's a Speccy one from the ZX Dev compo in 2018. Aliens: Neoplasma won that one, and while this game isn't quite in the same league, it at least stars everyone's favourite cuddly bonkers gazillionaire, Elon M. I guess it's risky to go with the full name, especially if you're still a Twitterer.

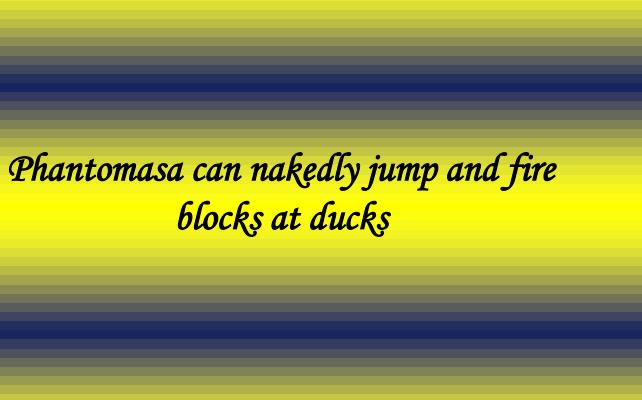
There are some differences. A jolly tune plays throughout, which rubbish Ultimate were seemingly incapable of. The various platforms are different on each level, bet A.C.G. never thought of that either. And sometimes objects go through platforms. Or maybe in front of them. That bit's a little odd, don't think that would faze those Stampers to be fair.

It plays alright, and even if it doesn't feel quite as arcade-slick as the classic itself, it's a fun leetle 'omage, monsieur. What we really need though is for someone to do a re-make of Lunar Jetman, and make it a thousand times easier. That really would be a great service to mankind.

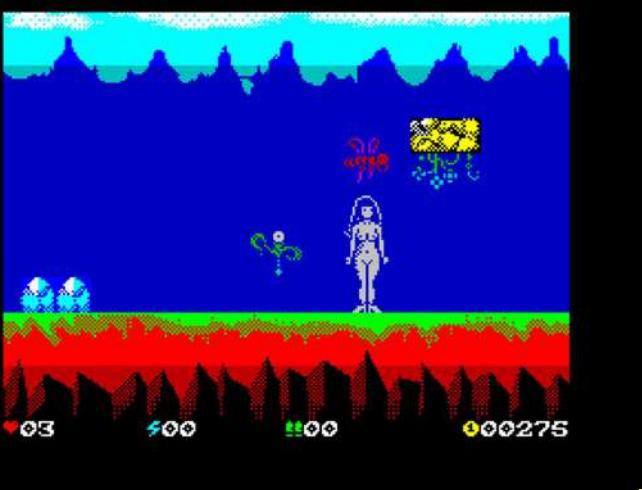


*Not too surprised she's bright blue.
Must be cold only having emojis to
cover your extremities*

Phantomasa considers taking up naked tree climbing. Ooh the chafing!



Various creatures come to gawp at our naked heroine - guys, seriously, at least try to have some class



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: F

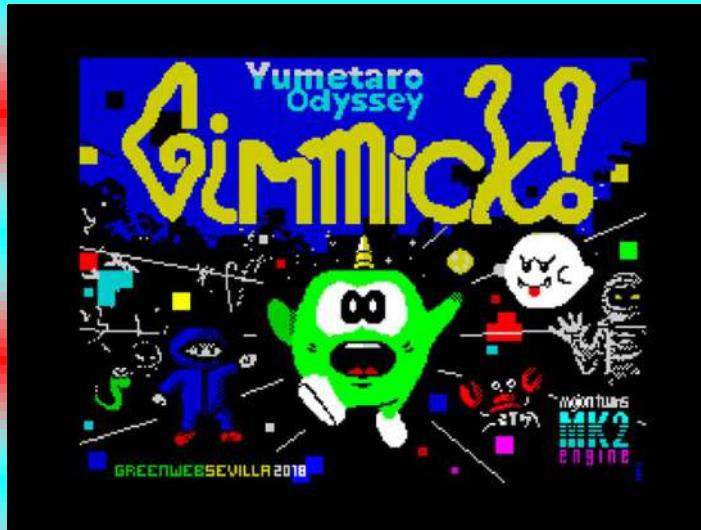
FUNDAMENTALLY LOATHSOME

(Mojon Twins, 2011)

Firstly the odd title of this odd title was almost certainly inspired by the *Marilyn Manson* song of the same name from 1998's rather good *Mechanical Animals* album. Though I never quite knew what he was going on about with it at the time, I don't think it involved starkers females, like this game does... but then he is more than a bit odd.

Secondly the Spanish seem obsessed with some dude called *Phantomas*, who starred in a long series of fairly humdrum looking platform games. So much so that they also made up a *Phantomasa*, a female version, and this is the third game starring herself apparently. Frankly Wally Week kicks Phantomas' backside every time, once he's got his momentum up.

Anyway you play a naked woman, in surely a new low for the *Mojons'* uber feminist agenda, and you have to collect enough coins falling from the sky to get to the next area for no apparent reason. Maybe eventually you'll be granted a skimpy piece of clobber at least. But I doubt it. It's highly repetitive and not a terribly good affair in any sense, but now at least I've played it, so you don't have to!



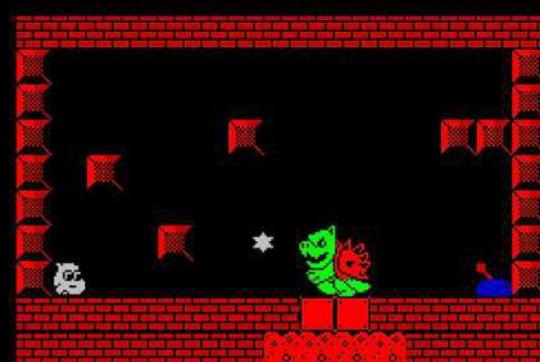
*"Choose the form of the destroyer"
whether snake, ninja, crab, mummy or
King Boo*

*Behind each door lurks a world of
wonder and plagiarism*



*Even the big bosses are cute as heck,
Kill it anyway*

*This level has the odd Sonic callback,
but is generally just a bit jungly*



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: G

GIMMICK! YUMETARO ODYSSEY

(GreenWebSevilla, 2018)

I picked this game not because it looks odd, since it doesn't particularly, but purely for the intriguing Oriental-style title. It's actually a remake of a NES game called Mr. Gimmick from 1992. Wonder how many modern Spectrum games have been inspired by consoles and computers which we would consider ancient by now, but actually came after the Speccy? Anyway, this one was written by Antonio Perez who has made many a fine game in his time, like Tokimal and the Ninjakul games. He's a veritable King Of The Platforms.

I've read the plot a few times and due to some confusion over personal pronouns, I can't quite suss out what's going on, or whether the protagonist is meant to be male or female. It doesn't matter, you're cute and blobular anyway. It seems that you've been zapped into a digital world and have to find your way home to the more boring one. You have to find seven magic balls to invoke a vampire dragon to help you obviously.

There are levels which are homages to Mario, Sonic and various other familiar games of yore, even Ghosts 'N' Goblins later on (I peeked again) and brilliantly done they are too. It's easy and fun to have a quick go at, but boy will you need to platform to God Level to complete it all.

This is a cracking little platformer which deserves a lot more press than it has received. Guess that's why I'm here then - just watch everyone else play it in the next few weeks and put it on Youchoob and FaceSpace! Still, this site is here to spread the good word, so if I can do my bit to help keep our mighty machine to the fore long into the future, then by gum I'll do it! Erm, that's enough pontificating, back to the review. Soooo the graphics are ultra cute, there's colour everywhere and great music too. THIS is how you do this type of game - many should take note.



*You're running for the cheese to feed
the mouse. But wait, there's a... saw
perhaps... in the way*

*Deathmanland is a great place to go
on holiday, the Travelodge is so handy
for the city centre*



*Glad to see the old hag from Cauldron
is still alive and... "well"?*

*Defeat Scooby with the battle axe?
Oh I don't know...*



НУ ЧТО КАСАТИК !
БУДЕМ СЧИТАТЬ, ЧТО ТЫ ЭТОТ LEVEL
НА ХАЛЯВКУ ПРОСКОЧИЛ !!!
ХА, ХА . . . Но тебе меня не добрать !

A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: H

HAMON IV

(Ascendancy Creative Labs, 1997)

Wow, this is an interesting proposition. It comes from Belarus unusually and has the subtitle "Return To Home From Deathmanland". Another version I've spotted refers to the place as "Hell", but how much more compelling does "Deathmanland" sound? To Deathmanland with you, sir!

There's a show-offy demo at the start, a familiar (Bela)Russian kind of thing to do. And also probably the reason why this game is 128k only. Aha, next comes a big long intro story with some pretty pics. Shame for me it's all in Russian, mind. I thought this was an English version, I've apparently been duped. There's some exceptional presentation on the menus. Intro, music, everything. It's a real treat for the senses.

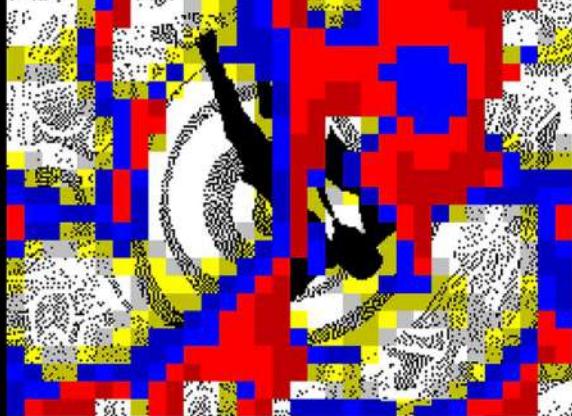
Then comes the game. Ah well, nothing lasts forever. Clearly these guys are talented demo makers, but are not quite playing at Zosya level when it comes to the game itself. It's a basic maze affair where you have to find the right object to remove the corresponding obstacle. Cheese feeds mouse, pickaxe breaks wall, knife stabs ghost (?), ring burns microchip, pliers cut wires, snacks feed Scooby Doo (cue lawyers). I could go on.

Your progress depends greatly on whether you can recognise what the graphics actually represent. They're not bad pictures at all, but it's still frequently hard to make them out, so trial and error is your bedfellow. Once you've sussed out what defeats what, it pretty much repeats itself for maze after maze, with no real variety apart from the odd music change. Ah well, it's certainly weird, so is ideal for a weird feature such as this ;)



*This bit's like the opening credits of a
'60s TV spy caper*

*True, it's not the happiest of stories.
The load screen hints at this*



*Take a break from zapping aliens and
read some actual literature instead*

*Despair. Shouldn't have listened to so
much Radiohead*

Anton didn't utter a word for a long moment. And then he stayed quiet a bit longer.

"Finally, he spoke. "I don't know how I'm supposed to respond to this. I mean, we've always been orphans. Our parents' identities were never established."

"That's absurd! They both lived to a ripe old age!" Karl was having a serious problem with staying calm. However, he did what he could not to seem like a frenzied madman. "Father died of cancer ten years ago, two days after his eightieth birthday."

"Have you... have you got any photos of them? Documents...?"

"Bloody hell, man, anything at all?!"

"No! That's exactly the problem! Everything that's connected with an object that disappears is also subject to utter disintegration, including all memory of it."

"...but this doesn't apply to you."

Karl sighed resignedly.

"It doesn't apply to me... and I don't know why that is. I'm trying to get to the bottom of it. But I can't take it any longer... I think I might have to shoot myself in the head. We had parents, we had a happy childhood, we lived with them until we were twenty or thereabouts... I mean, I lived with them till then, because you only moved away from Mother thirteen years later, you loser," Karl laughed unintentionally.

"Yes, that's me down to the ground," Anton said, his face

A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: J

IN NIHILUM REVERTERIS

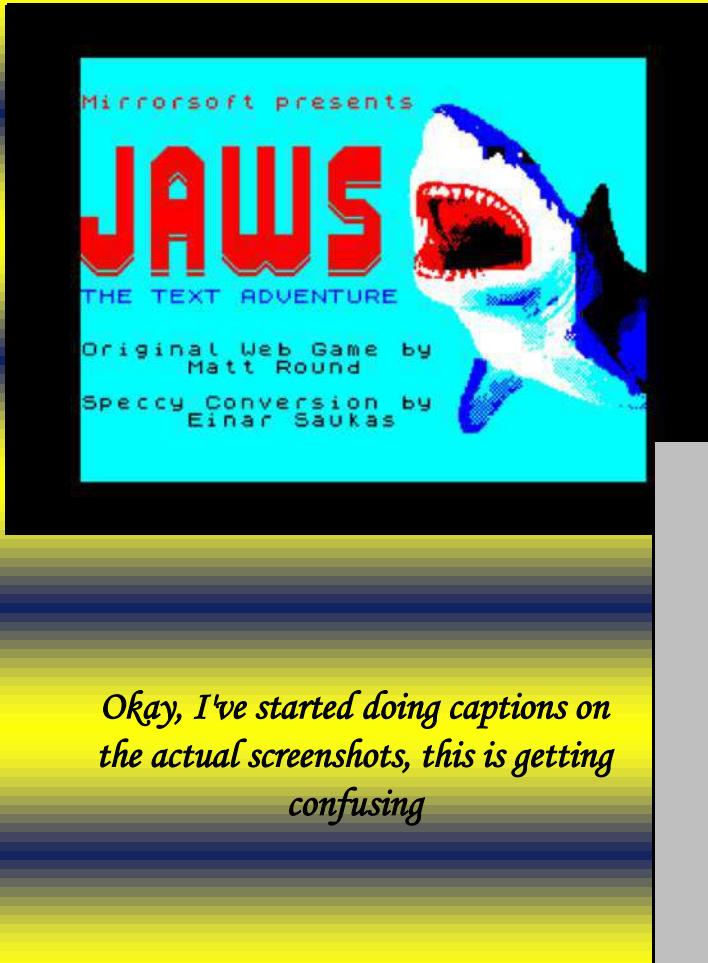
(Hooy-Program, 2018)

*Polish chappy Yerzmyey is proper handy with a tune. "You might know him from games like most of Jonny Boy Cauldwell's, *Hakkenkast* and Connect 4, I mean *Complica DX*." Like Troy McClure he is a master of his art and is rightly recognised as such. That *Simpsons* reference will go down like a sack of poop for anyone younger than 30, but let's face it, we're all nicely aged here ain't we?*

*But Yerzmyey didn't just "write the theme tune and sing the theme tune" on this title. He only went and wrote it, it being a piece of interactive fiction. He paid someone 850 Euros to translate it into English. Thanks to *Spectrum Computing* for this useless piece of information. So I guess it's a project close to his beepy heart.*

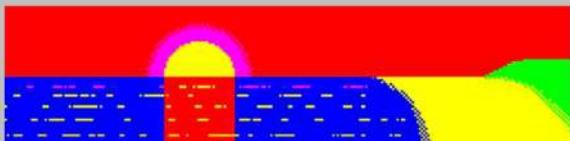
*And the good news is it's a cracking good yarn, really well translated. It's about a chap called Karl who is having some issues with parts of his life disappearing randomly. It's kinda *Philip K. Dickey* and dystopian and keeps your interest admirably.*

You only get to make a choice every few pages or so, but that's okay, just enjoy the rich text while you're waiting. And there are several different endings too. I think I got the least disastrous one first time round luckily. There's a predictably ace tune and some great graphics on the cut scenes too. I like, I like, I like.



Okay, I've started doing captions on the actual screenshots, this is getting confusing

Nice to see a cyan loading screen for a change. Points for absence of excessive blood spurtting



Waves lap against a sandy beach bathed in a red glow. West is the buoy. You notice something splashing around here - a naked WOMAN is on the surface!

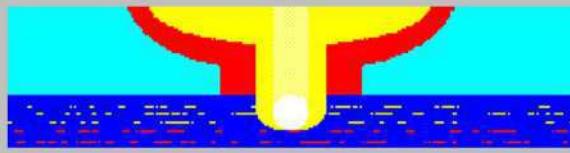
"NAKED WOMAN NOT PICTURED"



You swim slowly through the night, contemplating the solitary brutality of your existence as an apex predator. Continuing South will bring you near some buildings after sunrise.

"IT'S NOT EASY BEING JAWS"

It's a sickness really, it's not like you need to comment on everything ever...



As your teeth pierce the outer layers, hundreds of thousands of volts surge through your head before exploding your body.

The plutonium in your stomach turns into an atomic fireball that triggers all-out nuclear war, destroying the world.

Your final score: 47%
Use RESTART to play again
"IS THIS THE GOOD ENDING?"

I'll give the docs a call about it anyway. Asylum here I come!

A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: J

JAWS: THE TEXT ADVENTURE

(Einar Saukas, 2015)

*There was if you remember a famously unlicensed **Jaws** game on the Speccy back in the day (by **Screen 7** if you're not famil), but come now, a text adventure? I guess you must play Mr. Aviators himself, **Roy Scheider**, in his efforts to save the good Florida folk from ol' Big Teeth? Hope they do the bit where they all get wasted on the boat and sing "Ladies Of Spain".*

*No, of course not, you play the shark! I didn't actually see that one coming. The mighty **Mr. Saukas** made this BASIC Speccy remake of a javascript (dunno, something to do with coffee) game by **Matt Round**.*

*Allegedly (remember when that used to get said every few seconds on **Have I Got News For You** before Angus Deayton visited one too many hookers) **Mirrorsoft** originally commissioned the **Jaws** licence back in 1984, with the game to be programmed by husband and wife team **The Cruds**... Is that credibility I can hear being stretched somewhere?*

*So this is a comedy adventure, perhaps lacking the subtlety of a **Fergus McNeill**, but it's certainly different. You go round chomping holes in whatever you can until you explode due to scarfing too much plutonium. Well that's what happened to me. It's silly shark-infested fun with some nice piccies, and well worth 30 minutes of your time.*



Amazing to see the outside world in this game. The secretary doesn't agree though

Ah, one of Mr. Wacker's legendary assemblies. Sit down, Boy Wander!



Brand new teachers! A room full of crap! Suicide opportunities!

Mr. Rockett's still banging on and boring everyone even now. Eric is being spodey/asleep



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: K

KLASS OF '99

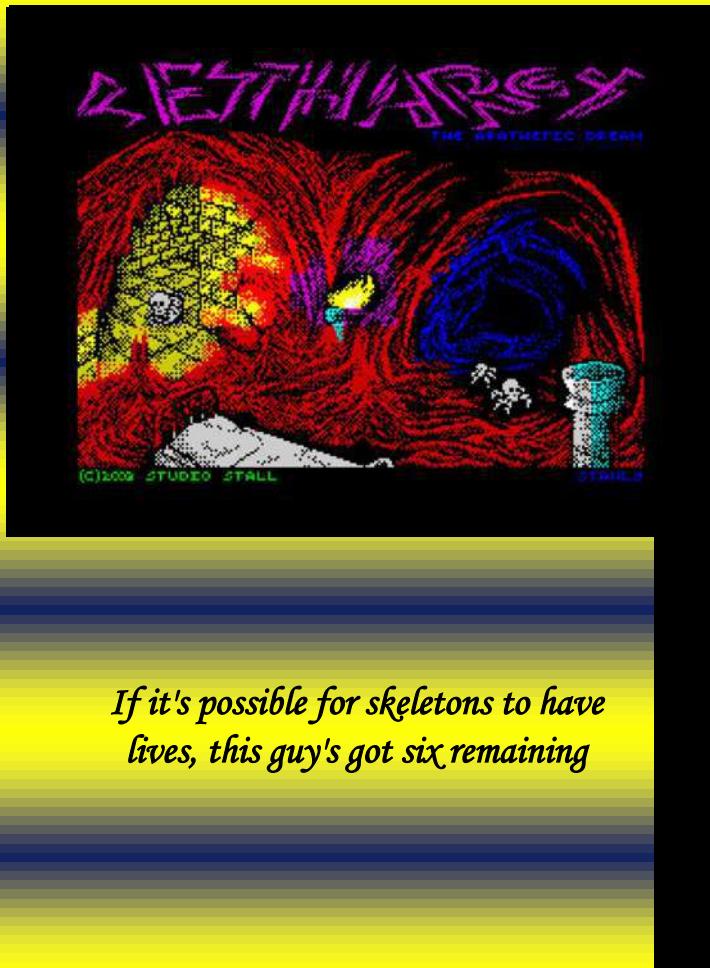
(James McKay, 2012)

What a great idea, giving the world that follow-up to classics Skool Daze and Back To Skool which never quite happened in the glorious '80s. Take my money now, Kickstarter! James McKay bravely attempted this in 2012, and impressively finished it on the PC. He admits his Speccy version isn't quite complete, but let's see just how far he managed to get.

Serial underachiever Eric has had another shocker of a term, and again he has to ensure his dreadful report doesn't see the light of day, or his parents' eyes at least. No safe to crack this time, he merely has to find the password for the secretary's PC instead. Very modern! And the school has expanded somewhat, with a curtained area for amateurish dramatics, plus a few more new staff, who are now out in force to stop any uncivilised behaviour.

First impressions are it's got a nice tune playing courtesy of Matthew Westcott, a.k.a. The Gasman (best we don't know why). And it's slow, but run it on insane speed on an emulator and all is groovy. Apart from the music then, but never mind. It's good fun to bounce your catapult pellets off hapless teachers' heads as ever, writing rude words on the boards all the while.

When you've racked up the inevitable 10,000 lines, a teacher comes and harasses you, but a bug means you can carry on anyway, they just follow you round! Schools are generally pretty ineffectual when it comes to discipline these days, so maybe that's deliberate. Wonder if James might finish it off one fine day, as it's definitely pretty klass thus far.



*Skulls scuttling along on legs. Bit like
in The Thing (shudder)*



*If it's possible for skeletons to have
lives, this guy's got six remaining*



*There are some great baddies. This one
threatens to warm those bones up*



*Dream Over! And also your bed's
shrunk and you're in the garden*

A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: L

LETHARGY: THE APATHETIC DREAM

(*Studio Stall, 2003*)

I was gonna dig around to find the plot for this one but... aaahhh, I just couldn't be arsed, it's too haaaaard. And I wasn't that bothered about it anyway. Lame joking aside, I actually can't find anything for it anywhere, it being Russian and obscure. You know me, if it's lurking on the internet and in English, I'd dig it out. Sadly my income from this site doesn't quite add up to enough to afford me Russian lessons. I could set up a [Patreon](#) I guess, but I kinda feel that's cheating people really. Retro Spectral enjoyment should be free, free I tell you!

The game, ah yes. Clearly it owes a fair amount to that mythical game [Legend](#), no sorry, legendary game [Myth](#). It may well be legendary but I still haven't played it properly myself, I couldn't quite get it going on my emulator. So this is all new to me. You play a cheeky little skeleton, who is rather cute. On the menu screen he walks and climbs around the writing like he's got ants in his non-existent pants. Reminds me of that [Scotch VHS](#) tape advert, that's still on isn't it?

You go round kicking everything like you play for [Undead United](#) ("They're by far the deadliest team... the world has ever seen"). Booting chests open reveals such treasures as a fairly ineffective sword and a clock, which I couldn't fathom how to use. There are far too many annoying little thrip creatures which eat away your health while you try to master the fiddly controls.

It looks great but is very tricky to get anywhere in. And for some reason there's great music before the game and when you die, but it's silent as the grave during the game. Maybe this game's niceties are lost in translation. Back to sleep zzzz.



Shoot the signs so Magentaman avoids anything red and hopefully collects the key on his way

Here's an idea. How about NOT running headlong into the pile of intestines?



You'll have to think darn fast, the climbing boffin has lost all sense and panics constantly

My advice for this one is "stay left"



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: M

THE MALIGNANT GORE

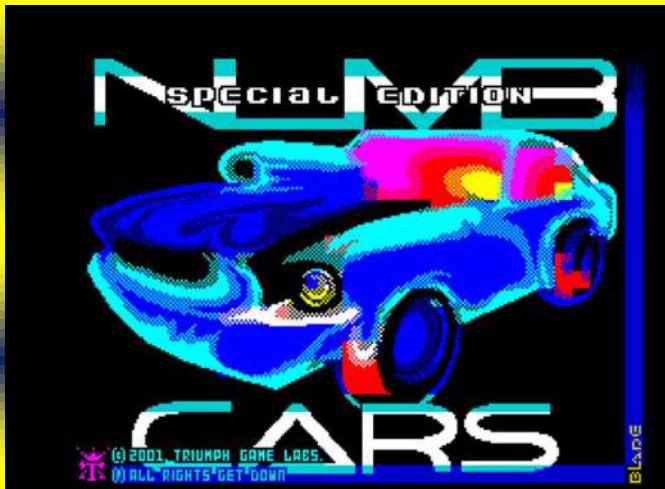
(*Sanctum Games, 2021*)

Clearly I picked this one for its cyclopean title, dripping in Lovecraftian singularity. At first one might think this would be a horrifying 18-rated adventure in the mould of Dracula, Jack The Ripper and all those CRL video nasties, or maybe that other recent Cthulhu-tastic adventure, Colour Beyond Time. But no, it's actually a puzzler, just with icky stuff in it. It was birthed a few years ago by Tom Dentith, masquerading as Sanctum Games, and seems to be his very own Spectrum one-hit wonder.

The plot she goes as follows. All was not well in the shadowy Omicron Facility X, but it wasn't the Hadron Collider blowing us all to bits, it was a containment breach of codename MG101, a.k.a. The Malignant Gore. And it sounds so harmless too... A huge load of red intestine has splurged out unpleasantly and killed every boffin, geek and scientist in the facility, spreading lab coats and coloured pens everywhere.

However one scientist survived somehow (must have been secretly drinking vials of radioactive waste in his lunch breaks) and for a change it's not you! Somehow you are also there (maybe you started the whole thing off, you evil swine) watching this poor sap running around flapping like crazy, and you have to shoot the blobs of gore and stop them eating him. But you also have to shoot the direction signs around the place to show the panicked poindexter which way to go. And you've only got 6 bullets. Gulp. So keeping a cool head is paramount. If you're lucky you'll have just enough bullets to blast the baddies and point Mr. Scientist in the right direction to escape each level and run to the self-destruct button (great, we're all dying anyway) to avoid the intestines eating everyone on Earth. Does this mean intestines also have intestines?

This is a fun and unusual game. You've got to move quickly as the scientist just won't stand still, so bad is his case of the jitters – he needs to go to the loo as well, on top of everything else. When you mess up, you can use a temporal sphere to reset things, so they're effectively lives. I've done alright so far, completing quite a few levels, but the trick is to do each one so well that you don't have to use any spheres at all for a while. Otherwise things soon catch up with you. The graphics are colourful and fun, sound is pretty average, but the game scores big on originality and playability, and deserves some praise for this. Be warned though, it might put you off sausages for life.



*I had plans to race around America
with my mates once in beasts like this*

*Rockin' the casbah in the desert wastes
of level 2*



*On the first level, country roads take
us home to the place we belong*

*Level 3 finds us on the beach, with
Chris Rea up front driving like a
maniac*



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: F

NUMB CARS

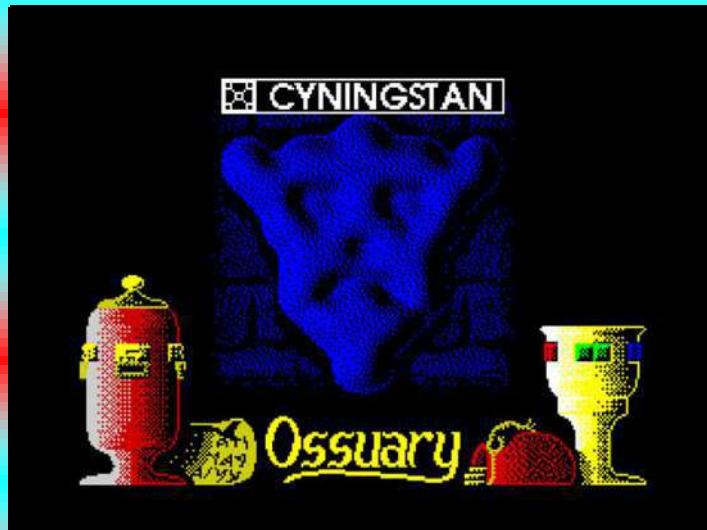
(*Triumph Games Lab, 2001*)

*What do you call 5 Russian chaps in a car? No, that's not a good way to start this. And I can't think of anything funny to say about the cars being numb, it's just so strange. I presume a lot got lost in translation, as I've never had to take my car to the garage because it's gone numb. What do you do in those circumstances? Shake it around a bit maybe, or drive around until it gets a bit of feeling back. Anyway, 5 dudes from Russia made this game back in 2001 as **Triumph Games Lab**, which may or may not mean that the car in question is the ultimate plastic '80s sporty number, the **TR7**.*

*I can find no instructions anywhere but there really isn't that much need for any in all honesty. Once you've negotiated the initial menu which looks like DOS or something scarily technical, you find that you have to score points by knocking other vehicles off the road, as if you were a **Hunter Of Spies**. The shame is there are no pedestrians around, as cult movie **Death Race 2000** proved that mowing them down was nothing less than a whole heap of fun. Wonder if I can lose my licence merely by saying that? I didn't mean it, fine gentlemen of the DVL A (I totally did).*

*The only problem is that you seem to be terrible at controlling your car. When you hit anyone, you career off crazily in the opposite direction, and if you leave the road, you lose a life, probably literally. Some vehicles bounce you more than others. Bike riders are usually the best ones to smash into, just like real life (seriously, stop it). And as your murderous journey goes on, you'll find plenty of **Audi** and **BMW** drivers who like to use the full width of the road and can send you spinning into the dust. The trick is to reach the end without dying, and there are a few different landscapes to burn through.*

*I enjoyed **Spy Hunter** at the time, a simple game but with some nice touches, like when you swap to drive a boat for a bit. And this starts off similarly, albeit with teeny sprites. But once you've sussed the patterns of the other cars, your road trip can get a bit repetitive. The best method is to aim right for them, and they usually move away from you. There's some decent music which is nice, and it's good to see a traditional arcade-style retro racer these days. A sequel appears to have been started but not finished, which is a shame. Maybe give this a go and see if you too have become comfortably numb.*



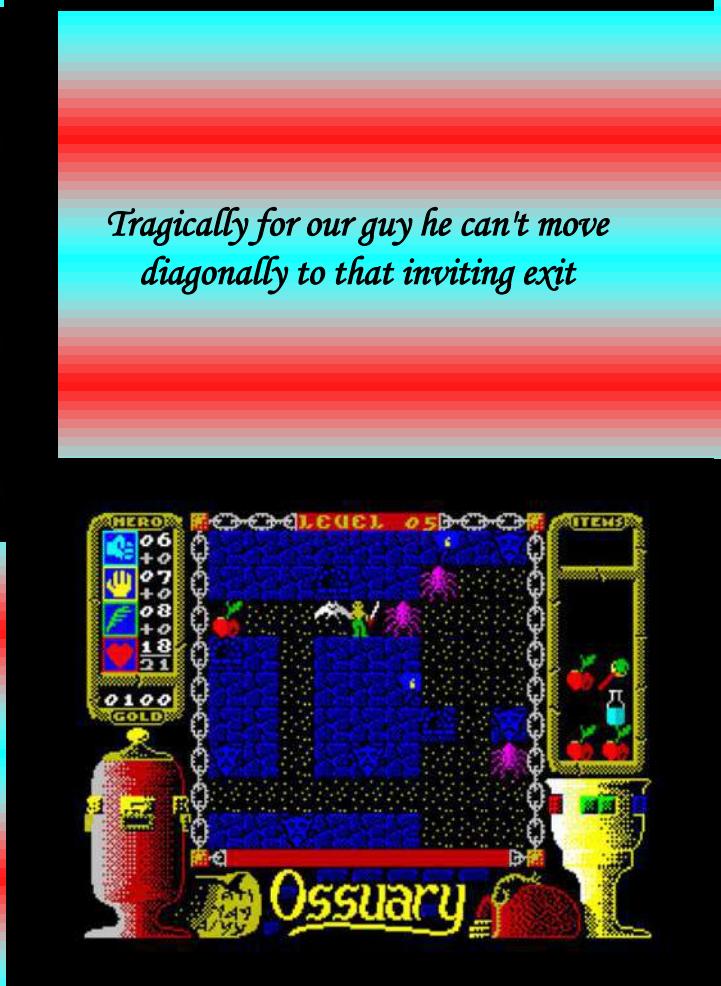
*Early on our hero is a happy camper,
with his 3 apples and lollipop*



*Funny looking heads these people
must have had*



*Well this looks most unpromising,
you've peed off Shelob and her mates*



*Tragically for our guy he can't move
diagonally to that inviting exit*

A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: O

OSSUARY (*Cyningstan*, 2013)

Damian Walker IS Cyningstan. And Cyningstan IS Damian Walker. Think so anyway, as he also authored *Barbarians*, which Crash quite liked I seem to recall. And *Intergalactic Space Rescue*, a simple Minefield type game which I briefly tried a while back. But I've picked this game which seems to be about birdhouses ("That's Aviary"-Ed.) as my Curiosity that begins with an O. If it wasn't for this, you might be reading a review about a modern version of *Othello*. Or probably not reading it.

So how come you're stuck between a rock and a boney place? Well you're trying to destroy a naughty necromancer who has taken up residence therein. So you've got to off him before your own little skull is added to all the ones around you. The good news is there's treasure down there, plus some probably gross food (Where did these apples come from?) plus the odd weapon to fend off the many bats, rats and cats, sorry spiders, that seem to have it in for you, even though they rarely trouble us in their overground incarnations.

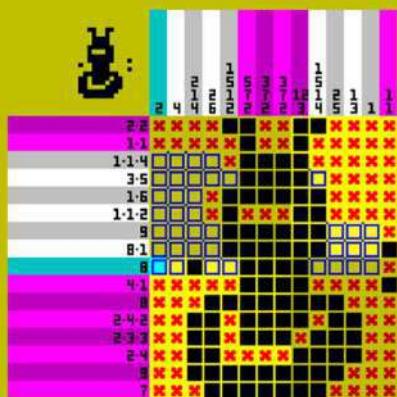
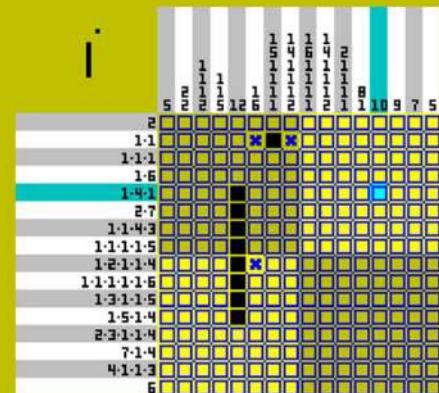
24 levels that be, and each one is randomly generated each time, so you might face a relatively long trek to reach the next, or it could just be around the corner. And the enemies are tres polite and will only move when you do, so take your time why don't you? It's very much like Vradark's *Sphere* in both these respects, only this game appears to fit into 16K unless I'm much mistaken, so it's a reduced version kinda. There's a nice colourful border around the play area (that sounds like a kid's thing, sorry) and an inventory box where you can store your cans of fizzy drink, snacks and weapons plus armour as and when you come across them.

This is quite a fun little dungeon crawler, but as is often the case with these things, I tend to find the first however many levels a bit of a breeze, then suddenly something will eff you up and stop you dead. Fighting the bats and rats is easy enough as long as you don't get surrounded, but the second the spiders appear, death soon seems to follow. Using weapons and a shield does help, and apparently there are magical objects later on in the game, but I still fared badly. Nevertheless, it's colourful old-school fun for a bit and I can guarantee that some will love it.



*Getting started can be tricky. Cleary
I've mastered this one already*

*Yeah alright, that Pheel guy's pretty
handy with the pixels*



*Yay, my T.L.L. plane in all its glory.
Just the 10 more to do now, better
book some leave*

*This one's all but done, whatever it is.
Maybe a few errors though...*



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: P

PIXEL QUEST ZERO

(Magazin Espectro, 2013)

Here's a rather leftfield offering from the omnipresent Mr. Saukas, plus his near-omnipresent mate MmcM and, erm, Pheel. Well I'm sure he's very lovely too. In fact, if he did the loading screen for this game, plus its two prequels which were of similar standard, he's a pixelart demigod. So some heavyweight names behind this game, wonder what the heck it's all about? Is it arcade or adventure, maybe an interactive novel or a flight sim?

It was released on 'Magazin Espectro' which sounds like one of those modern-day 16/48 type affairs which must come on a Dixons C60, and was preceded by the original Pixel Quest and Pixel Quest 2000. Will we ever track those pesky pixels down? I launched straight into this one, partly because I had no English instructions and partly because that's what I always do. I thought I knew what I was doing, but a few frustrating goes later, I had the distinct impression that I didn't. Alright, let's check out some helpful screenshots from the internet to see if they can shed any light.

Ah, okay, right. Let's try that then. Hmm. Oh hang on, it's like one of those annoying *sudoku* things. You have to use your powers of logic to slowly build up a picture, which when complete displays a well-known Speccy sprite, such as pesky Boy Wander off of Skool Daze. Each column and row tells you how many of the empty grid slots must be filled, and the trick is getting your verticals to match up with your horizontals. If it says '12' there'll be 12 in a row, but starting where? If it says '2.5.8.1' then there'll be that many separate blocks but with gaps in between, of what size you must find out yourself.

If it sounds painful, well it can be. But like a *sudoku* it can also be quite a relaxing experience too if you get on a roll. Only let's face it, this is much more fun than just putting a load of numbers in boxes. As your sprite starts to take shape, you get a sense of how it should look, which helps things too. But apply your cold logic and you won't go far wrong I think. It took me about half an hour to do one at last, the cute li'l plane from T.L.C., but I did feel a certain sense of achievement afterwards. A bit like doing these beautifully-crafted and witty reviews. No? Please yourselves! (Frankie Howerd lives on)



This picture is strangely compelling if extremely odd



Lydia constantly bested me despite the massive time allowance. Weird



You're halfway there with over 6 minutes left to defeat strange little Kasuga



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: Q

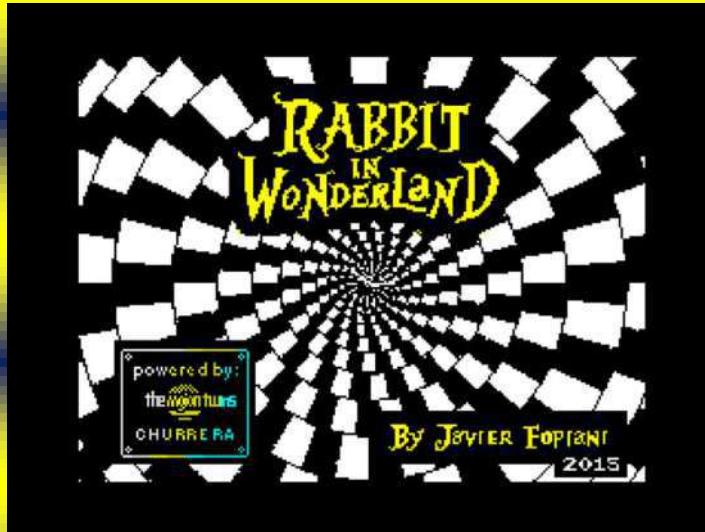
QUEST FOR WITCHCRAFT (Scene+ Austria, 2011)

Once again I pat myself on the back for being so diligent as to find a game for this feature that begins with a Q. Most lesser mortals aren't brave enough to do A-Zs for this very reason, though I don't like to blow my own trumpet of course. Surveys show that not very many people will read this article, but if you are one of the few who does take time to appreciate the more obscure things in life rather than read and repeat the same old stuff regurgitated for the umpteenth time, I duly salute you. You're my kinda people <3. That's meant to be a heart, but it doesn't really work with this font, pchah.

Wow that was some padding. Pretty offensive too. Alright, to business – this game hails from Austria for a nice change, from the retro sounding Scene+. The author *Leszek Chmielewski Daniel* seems to have made quite a few puzzle games for the Spectrum, many in a foreign language, only it won't be foreign to him of course. The music's by good old *Mister Beep* from Poland too, a man perfectly named by his parents who foresaw what he would be doing in his future life. And boy can he make our beloved machine beep good.

Jewel Quest. That's what this game is based on. Never heard of it, although it does strongly resemble that annoying affair *Candy Crush Saga*, the very definition of a game you play not for any enjoyment, but simply to pass time. The point of this game is that you have to destroy 8 evil witches by the power of Candy crush! You have to link 3 similar pictures together and make their background squares blue. This ye must do until the entire screenery is coloured blue. Then the witch dies somehow, and along comes another. Kill all 8 and you can rule the world yourself and be a malevolent bastard – now you're talking!

It's standard stuff, although it's nice to see such things on the Spectrum rather than your mobile in work time for a change. The gameplay is as repetitive but compelling as you might expect and it all ticks over quite nicely. It has fairly random time limits (not always less than the previous level strangely) and lacks the nice dropping-down animation of other versions, but that aside it plays okay. The little witchy pictures vary somewhat in quality but are a nice touch anyway. You start with *Yulia* who looks okay, then *Kasuga* who looks weird, *Wikit* who is odd too, *Asaka* who is coquettish anime stylee, a little bit of *Monica in my life* etc. I did pretty well until the conniving *Lydia* stopped me dead, even though I had a seemingly generous 10 minutes to get to grips with her...



*Best not to argue with this f*****
b****. Rabbit, language!*

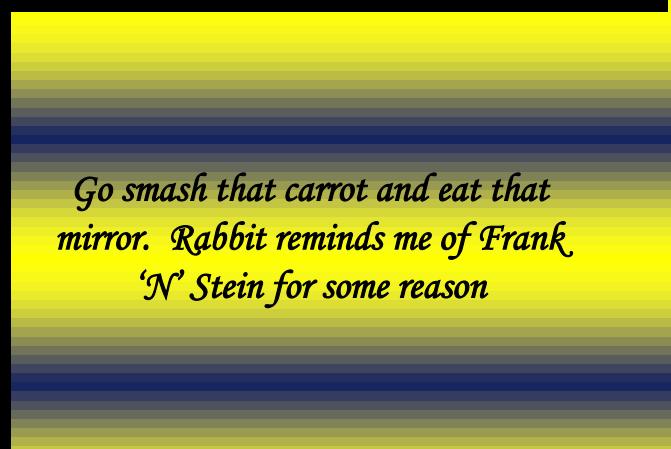
*Don't stare too long at this, you'll hurl
all over your laptop/mobile*



THE LOOKING GLASSES ARE
THE ONLY ENTRANCE. THE
QUEEN ORDERED THE WHITE
RABBIT, THE MOST AGILE IN
THE KINGDOM, TO DESTROY THEM.



*Use mushrooms to get higher, maaaan.
Lewis Carroll would agree*



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: R

RABBIT IN WONDERLAND

(Javier Fopiani, 2015)

*This game probably shouldn't be a Curiosity really, there's nothing particularly odd about it. What is odd though is that it doesn't seem to be particularly well known. Authored by Javier Fopiani who went on to make the acclaimed *Alien Girl* and the equally acclaimed *Nosy*, this was an earlier effort of his. In the same year as doing this game, he also produced *Rabbit In Nightmareland*, which seems to be a Halloween version of this one, although the game appears to be somewhat different. He dedicates all his games to his *Dulcinea*, which is quite sweet (I assume it's a person). And the Nightmareland game is even based on "the nightmare of my Dulcinea". All very intriguing and baroque. Probably.*

*But for this one, you play the bunny in the *Alice In Wonderland* true-life story. After Alice managed to escape, the evil *Queen of Hearts* was peed off and commanded you to break all the looking glasses (mirrors to you) in the shire so no-one could ever come back in. You have to jump on them, which sounds extremely painful, especially with uncovered bunny feet horribly exposed. If you don't manage it, you know what she'll do, almost certainly involving putting a certain distance between your body and your floppy-eared head. Gulp. So your role is that of a hapless anti-hero, or stooge really I suppose. They have feelings too, you know, being a goon isn't as easy as you might think. They have really poor pension rights.*

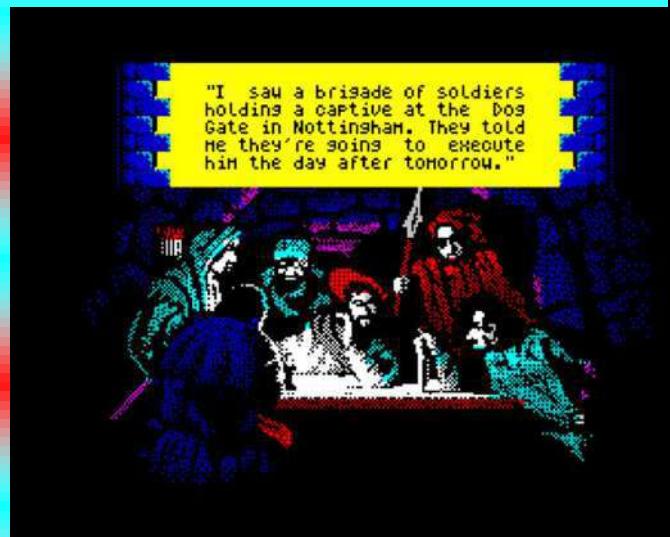
*It's platforming naturally, but done with some purpose. You have to jump on mirrors from above as if they're *Super Mario* villains, find keys to unlock doors and eat carrots to keep your coat all nice and fluffy. If you're going to make a platformer, you need something to keep people's interest and in this game that thing is an ever-decreasing time limit. You find clocks lying around – this is Wonderland after all – to top up your tank of time, but you're usually running around trying to do things as fast as you can most of the time. As the bunny says himself at the start "I'm late, I'm late for a very important date". Cue panic. Sheer Panic. Blind Panic. Panic by Mikrogen.*

*The graphics and colour are good as you'd expect, and the sound is very nice with a tune that I'd really love to know just how long its duration is. Because you think it's repeating in standard fashion, but then you hear a different bit. How bewildering and disorientating, but beguiling and intriguing. Now I'm starting to sound like the *Mad Hatter* himself, one of the many tripped-out residents from the book. Javier knows his stuff, so I'd recommend you have a go at this and also *Rabbit In Nightmareland* – they're hidden platforming gems.*



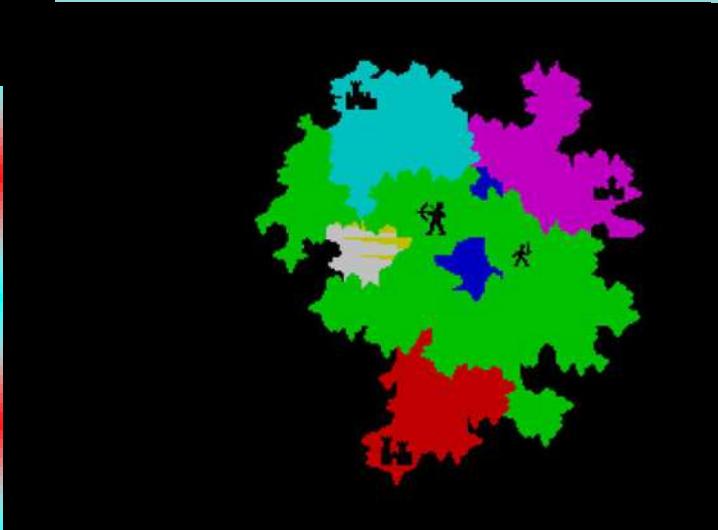
The main game screen sees Robin looking more constipated this time

This psychedelic Costner looks amazing, eh?



Robin and teeny Much run this place for all of five seconds until those non-green areas engulf them

We're droppin' eaves in the tavern, Mister Frodo. Shhh, act natural...



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: S

SHERWOOD (*Ultrasoft, 1992*)

"Robin... Robin... The hooded man.../hooligan..." as *Clannad* once sang dreamily. Not sure there were any other parts to that song actually. The man in green was a popular fellow in the Speccy world. Let's take a moment to appreciate his various adventures, since we've nothing better planned for the next few minutes.

First was Adventure International's pompously titled *Robin of Sherwood: The Touchstones of Rhiannon*, one of their adventures which looked beautiful but played painful, but it did get great reviews on the back of the insipid TV series. Artic did one too, called simply *Robin Hood* (or *Adventure H* if you'd rather) on their *Assemblage* compilation. Quilled with graphics, and capital letters all the way in true Artic style.

1986 gave us Silversoft's *Robin of Sherlock*, an early Fergus McNeill title featuring a bizarre mash-up and that infamous *BREAK WINDOW* bug. Robin finally got an arcade game in Odin's *Robin Of The Wood* next, a big hit for the Yesod crew, who hopefully managed to avoid being sued for breach of copyright. I always thought it was called *Robin O' The Wood*, but apparently they changed that. Bit o' a shame, I think.

Mastertronic gave us *The Curse of Sherwood* in 1987, to no great acclaim. Then Code Masters must have snaffled up the rights to Mr. Hood, as they brought out *Super Robin Hood*, which wasn't massively well received, probably because they missed the word 'Simulator' off the end. Then, in the extraordinarily late year of 1993 came *Robin Hood: Legend Quest*, which got good reviews from everyone, except Crash who had gone kaput by that time. In modern times, we've had *Loxley* in 2022, a veritable modern classic, sirrah.

Meanwhile in Slovakia... in 1992 Ultrasoft produced this game, *Sherwood*. I'm treating it as a modern game here, since not many of us knew what was going on in Slovakia in 1992, and it probably wasn't even called Slovakia at that time. It got reviewed by all the big Slovak Speccy mags. *BiT* magazine gave it 84%, including 91% for 'Grafika' while *Proxima Magazine* reviewed it too later on and seemed to like it. Possibly. As far as I can tell. Those 'cheeky' chaps known as Bumfun brought it to our shores in 2016, subtitled it "Defender of the Realm", hoping people might mistake it for *Defender Of The Crown*.

Aaaaaanyway, onto the game at length, and cue some amateur dramatics. 'SBLOOD! The great nation of Albion (that's England, not West Bromwich) is in turmoil! The big nobs of the land have all turned on each other and are squabbling for power like great big babies. You as Bob Hoodie must best them and claim the land for the one true king – Aragorn! You must kill off *Alan Rickman*, *Abbott Hugo* (who?) and *Baron Fitz-Alwin* (you're just making these up now), free *Lady Marian*, find the silver arrow and give it to *Ferne*. All within 60 days, earning 219 Nectar points along the way. HUSSAH!

So it's a strategy game eh, a bit of a change from Robin's previous Spectral jaunts? First maybe stop to appreciate that rather nice loading screen, plus a little tunelet on the intro screen – all very pleasant, and it's not even *Greensleeves*, so bonus points there. The main screen in the game has a map in the background, with various factions shown in different colours, like a big ol' game of *Robin Hood Risk*. You start off with your good mate Much (the miller's son) in tow and together you must repel the odious/odorous hordes. There's a pen pic of '90s Man *Kevin Costner* too and an interesting-looking list of available options to choose from.

First you could use a decent arsenal, Bumfun insist on it. The corner shop sells swords, spears, shields and arrows, which all greatly help your chances of success, and you can divide them however you like between Robin and Much, though you can guarantee Robin will want the best stuff for himself, the shameless glory-



You can't beat a bit of Bully, and Tuck's well on his way to winning the speedboat



Ooh, someone's wooden sword is gonna snap here



*"Yahtzee! Pontoon! Gin rummy!"
Robin's not very good at gambling*

seeker. As so often in real life though, being able to afford said weaponry can be the main obstacle to survival. You start with a mere tenner in thy purse so you have to ponder how to increase thy funds. You haven't really got time to wait for that ISA from your parents to mature.

So you have two options. The first is to gamble what little you have and hope for the best. This means a trip to the local tavern, which is always welcome, though in times of yore usually resulted in a fist fight. Options at the pub are sadly a bit limited, you can't even get leathered. First you can 'listen', which might get you thrown out if you don't accompany it with buying a pint usually. This tells you briefly where the plot is up to, and how much of a bounty is on your head (gulp, keep that hood down low there). The other choice is to 'play dice', but this can't exactly be described as a sub-game as three dice appear for you and three for your opponent, and the highest wins. Not quite *Yahtzee* but you might get lucky for a few extra groats.

The more profitable way of gaining riches is to 'go stealing'. This can yield quick, relatively painless profits, but you'll find that before long a certain *Friar Tuck* will come and threaten to sit on you unless you beat him in an archery competition. Oh goody, a proper sub-game! The view changes to show a target, you mash the relevant button, then try to aim the drunken cross-hairs in the right direction. I couldn't get the power bit to work properly annoyingly, so none of my goes registered, while the big-boned Man of God's aim was pretty darn good. So he went and sat on me, squishing me to a gory pulp and ending the game horrifically.

Not really, but once you've got some dosh and an arrow or two, you can begin to move your two characters around the Risk board, either together or separately. When you move into an area, it tells you how many enemy soldiers are there, and your weapons get used up accordingly depending on the numbers involved. Don't go near enemy bases as you'll come up against 355 in one go. You might win your first few battles, but then find things harder going, if you're anything like me, and soon "Brave Sir Robin will be bravely running away". The enemy forces spread faster than a *Chaos* gooey blob, which gave me the impression that you don't really seem to stand much of a chance overall. Such is life as a rag-tag revolutionary I suppose.

You can also visit some friends for light relief, which is nice. If you fancy paying *Herne* the horny hunter a visit before you've got the silver arrow (his Mercedes), you get told "Robin went into Herne's cave and waited the whole day. Herne did not come." No Rich Tea and sympathy there then. If you fancy parlying with one of your enemies, you can call on *Abbot Hugo* – "Robin knocked on the monastery gate disguised as a beggar. Monks warded him off with bludgeons." Not very Christian. Or worse, pop round to *Baron Fitz-Alwin*'s crib – "The Baron throws a knife and kills Robin with a well-aimed throw." Oh.

So how about going doolally and visit the *Sheriff Of Nottingham* himself? He's a reasonable guy, what could possibly go wrong? Well if you pop round at the wrong moment you get this message – "Robin entered into Nottingham disguised as a Potter. He messed around the whole day returning to the forest in the evening." Messed around indeed! But if you time it right (no idea how) you'll get another sub-game, this time a quick round of *Barbarian*, going mano-a-mano with Rickman, armed with pointy swords. This bit should be great, but no matter what I did, he thwacked me more than I could thwack him, and swift death ensued. I didn't get my head lopped off, but neither did I get the chance to ogle *Princess Mariana*'s assets.

It has to be said that I'm in no way an aficionado of strategy games on the Speccy. With the exception of all of Julian Gollop's amazing canon, I can't think of any I've really taken to. This one has its plusses though – some brilliant graphics for a few of the scenes, a good bit of music and a nice user interface generally. But it doesn't play quite as well as it looks, and although you're presented with a nice list of actions throughout, in reality only a couple are of any use most of the time. As a 'Curiosity of the Modern Age' though, it's certainly worth a look if Slovakian interpretations of olde English legends is your thang. Altogether now, you know you all love this one, "Look into my eyes, and you will seeeeeeeee...." (bang, smash, ouch)

28 COSTUMES

The
Trans-Siberian
Mystery

PART 1

Here's where you start. Got drunk and fell asleep on the train yet again

Yes. The
virus was
released.

Is it
done?



Pies, maps, jazz mags. Why can't real-life Economy Class be like this?

Some lovely fonts on display here.
Just lovely

First Class
Leather seats and polished fittings gleam in the cosy surroundings. A few copies of *The Times* are scattered here and there. Main exit is on east side. The door to the south has a red light on the lock.

→Look Push N
Take Talk E
Use Quit S
Cancel

A water cooler moment at Elon Musk's headquarters

Economy Class
Murky curtains and stained carpets compliment the stench. Various dodgy mags and rag ends aplenty. Main exit is on east side. A small window looks into the drivers cab.

Nick is asleep snoring heavily on the floor.

→Look Push N
Take Talk E
Use Quit S
Cancel

A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: **T**

THE TRANS-SIBERIAN MYSTERY

(Retrospected, 2005)

I played this game a few years ago, but little did I realise that there is a kind of mystery surrounding the game itself, as well as the *Trans Siberian* one in question. You see, it's been written by a mysterious personage called *Luanti P. Shuman*, about whom we know nothing else. It was released by an entity called *Retrospected* in 2005, who don't appear elsewhere in the Spectral archives. And very sadly, the game 'proper' is actually *Missing In Action* (one of the better Stallone movies), and all we have is a demo version as such. One introduction screen mentions *Cronosoft*, but their shop on the web has no mention of this game at all. Intriguing...

I also have in the back of my mind that a couple of years ago, *Sir Paul of Jenkinson* played this game on one of his *The Spectrum Show* shows, unless my memory has played tricks on me. So off I went, rootling through the PDFs of the magazines he did as spin-offs of his *Youtube* shows, hoping to find this game in their contents pages to save going through the whole lot. But damn it, I couldn't find a sausage, and had to strongly resist the temptation to read through most of them, particularly the reviews he did of all those epic games on *Cascade*'s *Cassette 50! Classic*.

Okay, I've gone back to show 60 now and still no joy, gonna have to give up on that one. I have however noticed that *ZX Shed*, which ran for not very long but looked pretty interesting, previewed the game in their issue 2 in 2006, or should I say also played the demo version only, and they were looking forward to *Cronosoft* releasing the full version some time soon. Well I'm still looking forward to it in the year 2024 as it seems to have well and truly slipped off the radar.

Let's start up the game and hunt for more clues as we go then. There's a movie style intro with words fading slowly in, then fading slowly out again, to raise dramatic tension, but done with tongue firmly in cheek, "*The Spank Group* with *Cronosoft* presents an off-kilter game by *Luanti P. Shuman*". Then the title screen, with quite a cool Eastern European sounding beeper tune briefly serenading us. But what's this? At the top of the screen it says "28 Costumes" in big writing, as though we should already know what the heck it's referring to. To the internet, Robin!

Okay, so 28 Costumes are, or probably were by now, a pop group hailing from good old *Liverpool*, over the water from me. Well I've not heard of them, but my finger is hardly on the musical pulse of late. Also known as "*The Cossies*" (how Scouse is that?) they started up in 2003, signing to *Spank Records* funnily enough, and have released an album, "*The Fake Death Experience*". In 2010 the singer moved to Berlin and that was pretty much that. Their album has the band name in the same logo as that which appears on the game. Hmmmm.

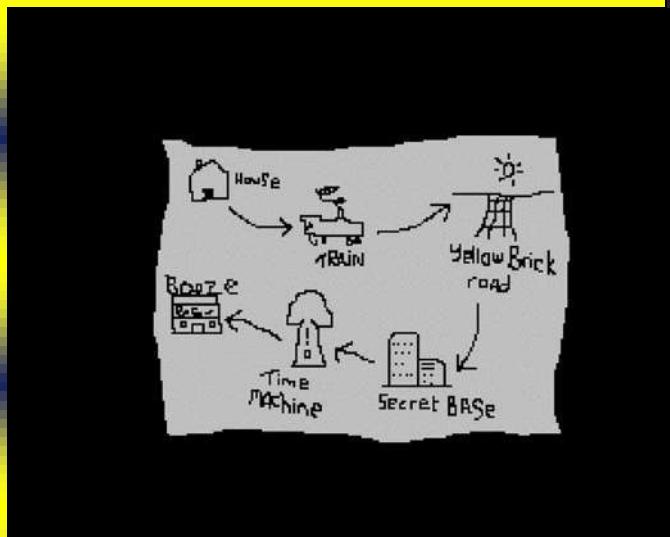
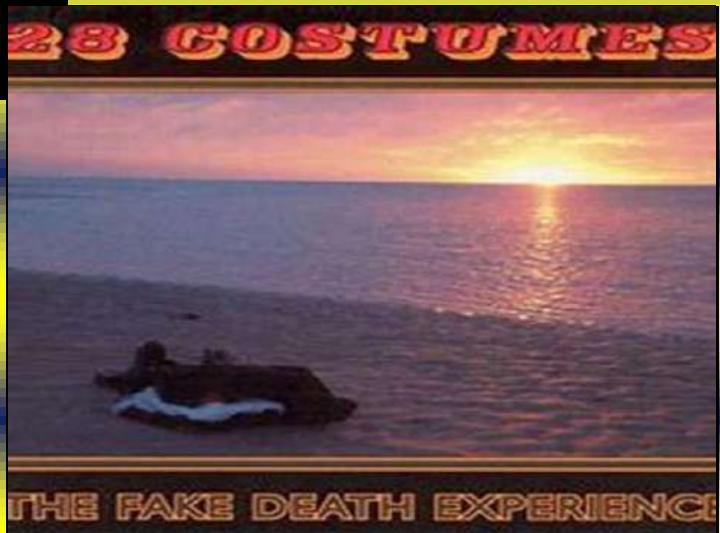
And lookit, they've only gone and done a song called "*Trans-Siberian Express*" which clocks in at over 10 minutes somehow. It's on *Youchoob* if you're desperate. It's a third actual song, a third jazz odyssey and a third silence. But no mention of a Spectrum game.

One band member goes by the name of *Nick Hoare*, and during the game there is indeed a chap fast asleep by the name of *Nick*. Coincidence? I think not.



The Cossies' magnum opus topped the album charts for 0 weeks

Quick, stick the pencil in the pie and win the Turner Prize. Oh and stop the train too if you can



Possibly the best 'Game Over' screen of all time ever?



So what's the point here? Well presumably this game was made by a fan of the group, presumably [Luanti P. Shuman](#) (if that's not an anagram. Apologies to them if it's not) as a homage or some such. The Stranglers had a game made about them after all many moons ago. And [The Thompson Twins](#), but I've been over that already and have no desire to revisit it again thanks. Oh hang on, I'd better talk about the game a bit before I get too distracted by the oddness of the whole thing.

The dramatic writing continues. "Some time in the future. Probably in another dimension. Or something (hoho) Where am I? I feel queasy. My head..." and so it begins. You wake up in a first class carriage of a train in the year 2028 and your mission is... erm, to make sense of stuff generally. So mostly a text adventure then, but with some notable differences that set it apart from most.

The screen is laid out real nice like. Location name at the top, succinct description below, then a number of big key words, harking back to many a point and click adventure from the '90s. Another box on the bottom right, mysteriously labelled "[Badgercom](#)" allows for text replies to taking certain actions. It's a lovely layout, clear and not over-complicated at all, unlike some adventure games of old where the screen has gotten messed up with too many icons, or a preponderance of text description. Another nice feature is that if you do something, and it's the wrong move, nothing happens! This sounds stupid, but it saves time no end – only useful actions get a response. And possible compass directions are illuminated, while dead ends are not. It's genius really.

The other difference is that now and then you will get some [graphics](#) thrown in. There's a comical conversation between two nefarious types, using speech bubbles to good effect. And a quite alarming screen that pops up when you cark. Someone's pretty good at digitising, it's clear to see, and these little touches add a lot to the overall experience.

There aren't many locations as such on the train and no sign of [Hercule Poirot](#), but then that's probably because we're only playing a demo version. At times it reminds me of a text adventure version of [Stop The Express](#), particularly when you inevitably find yourself on top of the train, rather than inside it (happens to me every day on the way to work), only it's a bit more forgiving than that unusual [Sinclair](#) title.

A cheeky sense of humour makes itself known quite regularly, for example "Use Toilet" gets the reply "It's locked. You wet your pants". And perusing the copy of [Razzle](#) that can be found results in a very rude reply indeed. No I'm not repeating it here, it's too darn saucy. Ooer missus, how's your father, is your missus a goer etc. Argh, I've gone the full [Frankie Howerd](#) again, oooooooooooooohhhhhh titter ye not.

Anyway, this mysterious locomotive escapade is short, but oh so sweet. It's not often you actually enjoy playing an adventure, if I'm not speaking out of term here ("You are" - adventure lovers everywhere). There's always a heavy dose of masochism and frustration involved in most, but this one is so nicely written and full of quirky humour, the time passes very quickly and enjoyably. Ideally I'd like [Mr/Ms. P. Shuman](#) to make a lot more adventures like this, and I could easily become a convert.

So with this in mind, a final appeal on behalf of [Crimestoppers](#). Do you know anything more about this game? Were you in the vicinity when the game was made or released? Are you a member of popular beat combo [28 Costumes](#)? Could you offer any evidence which might assist in the ongoing investigation? If so, please call [0800 5318008](#) or simply add your comment in the space below. Many thanks to any who can help and... please... don't have nightmares.



*Ha, love this mock covertape inlay.
Remember cutting these out to go with
your crappy freebie tape?*

*Christmas zombies? I think they had
them in Saints Row 4 possibly*



©2002, 2006, 2007 The Government™.
Complimentary Peanuts available.

*Boris Johnson's mind control
techniques do work on most voters*

*I think there's something wrong with
my Speccy. Off to Microsnips then...*



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: T

THE UNOFFICIAL ZOMBO'S CHRISTMAS CAPERS

(Monsterbytes, 2016)

Malcolm Kirk likes to have a play with games designing software, it's fair to say. He's had a go on 3D Construction Kit, the one which Incentive did their Freescape stuff with (remember 3D Splat?), producing *Loups Garoux* and *Dead By Dawn*. And he also dabbled with C.R.L.'s dubious 3D Game Maker, of which no good ever came, by making *Dredd Over Eels* and *Sam Slade*. And finally he thought he'd give Jonathan Cauldwell's ubiquitous Arcade Game Designer a whirl, making a couple of efforts starring a certain 'Zombo'.

So what is a 'Zombo'? Well if you have a decent knowledge of the works of those splendid folk at 2000 A.D. comi... sorry, graphic novels, you might know. He popped up in a couple of serieses in that brilliant rag, with the premise that he's one of the undead clearly, hence the name, but he's a remarkably polite one. He'll ask if he can chew on your arm before just going ahead and doing it. I've read a couple of the stories and can confirm it's not bad, if not perhaps one of the most outstanding moments in their illustrious history.

And now a quick aside about comi... graphic novels. I've really got into these lately because since becoming a parent 11 years ago I no longer seem to be able to stay awake for long enough to read a 'proper' book. I read ten minutes, fall asleep, then next time I resume about 10 pages further back to try to figure out what was going on last time. It's no good, so I've given up on them and turned to comi... oh what the hell, let's call them what they are. Though I feel they're somewhat removed from the Beano and Whizzer And Chips, which I favoured a loooooong time ago. Judge Dredd never shot The Bash Street Kids to s**t as far as I can remember, more's the pity.

Back in the late '80s, I'd heard of 2000 A.D. on and off, partly through the few Speccy games that featured their characters, and was advised they were quite 'punk' and more, well... British than the massive army of Marvel and DC comics with their endless superheroes. So a few years back I bought some of their bookish offerings, including *Nemesis The Warlock*, and found them to be really good. Quite gritty and with an ever-present black sense of humour for lols. So I'd say to you all that it's never too late to get into graphic novelry, check it out - you'll love it or I'll give you your money back (not really). Just don't buy one individual 2000 A.D. comic like I did at first - it won't make any sense as all the stories will already be well in progress. Nemesis is as epic a place to start as any, that's messed up.

Aside over. This wasn't Mr. Kirk's first Zombo game actually. He did one simply called 'Zombo' in 2015 which New Crash reviewed, giving it a healthy 84%. A year later he decided to make a follow-up with a Christmassy flavour to it. Because why not, doesn't everyone enjoy a Speccy game with an avalanche of snow thrown over it? And I'm greatly indebted to him for so doing, as I was really struggling trying to find another modern game that seemed interesting enough and crucially begins with a 'U' for this feature. Good work, *Captain Kirk!*



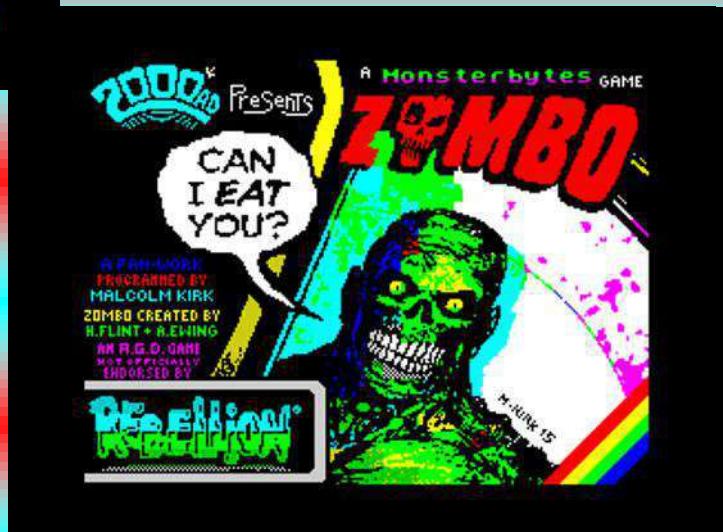
Horace is drinking nog in the lodge, as he broke both legs skiing again

It's possible that zombies are the only people who like xmas pudding these days



Ah, there's Santa! Oh, he's gone all wrong...

The screen from the first Zombo game. Don't forget to say 'please', Zombo...



"FIGGY PUDDING!" screams our green anti-hero on the impressive loading screen. It's so nice to see that zombies enjoy the festive season too, they deserve prezies and time off work as much as us un-undead types, otherwise it's just racist. And there's a treat in store once loading has finished too. The game crashes. But wait, there's more than a touch of the *Brian Bloodaxes* here. That error message looks a little irregular – "C Egggnog in BASIC, 0:2", where's my Sinclair manual? Then the 128k menu, with an intriguing option for "Killer Bees". Mr. Kirk has well and truly embraced the anarchic 2000 A.D. mentality here, and I for one LOVE IT!

There follows a screen with El Zomberino wearing a xmas hat and an earnest message to "TRUST YOUR GOVERNMENT". It's reminiscent of that classic subversive movie "*They Live*" in tone. You know, the one where 'Rowdy' Roddy Piper runs out of bubblegum and has to chew butts instead. And there's a two minute long fight in an alley over who's got the best sunglasses. I'm afraid if you haven't watched it and loved it, I'm not going to allow you to continue reading this review.

Right, now that they've gone, those of us with great taste can crack on merrily, it being xmas in Zombieland and all. But wait, *Little Saint Nick* has gone and had a psychotic break, according to the humorous inlay, and the Government are insisting that poor Zombo do the job instead, and find Santa too if poss. There's a staggering 6 presents to find (they better be good ones) before our hero can put his feet up on Xmas night.

He has, oh I don't know, about 20 screens to negotiate, many with marauding folk on the Naughty List who want to (Christmas) hamper his efforts and drain his energy, which isn't high anyway since he's a zombie. There are coloured keys around and about and some quite weird objects, such as a 2000 A.D. annual and a rubber *Godzilla*, but the most useful is the Shootybang 2000, which he can go and shoot baddies with. It's quite the majestic sight seeing a zombie firing a gun at folk, you don't see it every day, even in Hollywood.

Other bizarre moments including saying hello to good old *Horace* while he's enjoying a bit of apres-ski in a log cabin, the game ending which I can't really talk about (sorry) and the message you get when you die - "Zombo mulled, but he'll be repeated. God save us from the Trump!" A message that's as true now as it's ever been.

I was going to do a bit about Speccy Xmas games generally, but everyone's done that to death already, so nah. In short I reckon *The Snowman* is possibly the best of an average bunch. So forget that, I'll go straight to the graphics/colour/sound bit. The graphics are good enough for this type of game and quite amusing on the whole, making for an admirably weird xmas theme. Colour is used very well, with plenty of snow on the ground everywhere. Sound is functional, some zombie-esque music might have been nice I guess, but no matter.

You get 3 lives, as is the zombie way possibly, and it's an easy enough game to complete, which is appropriate to the festive nature of the whole thing. It's fundamentally straightforward and probably wouldn't win many Game of the Year awards, even from the ever generous *Planeta Sinclair*, but that's not really the point. It's just a good laugh and a bit of a treat for fans of 2000 A.D. So always remember to trust your Government, and would it be okay if I chewed on your arm for a bit please?



Some great, disturbing art for this game. Apologies to the artist for squishing it somewhat here

Into The Black Hole we go. Hope we get to chat to Vincent



ZX SPECTRUM 128K



Watch Billie Eilish get battered by a monkey. "The Void Bringer!"

'Nuff said really



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: V

THE VOID BRINGER

(Furillo Productions, 2022)

Now where do I start with this one? There are ‘Curiosities of the Modern Age’ and then there’s this game. Maybe begin by introducing those who are responsible for “*The Void Bringer – The Backrooms: Level 711*” to give it its full title. It’s *Furillo* of course, whose unhinged products never fail to amuse and bemuse.

Quick run-down of their Spectral wares in the form of a badly-metered poem or song? Absolutely...

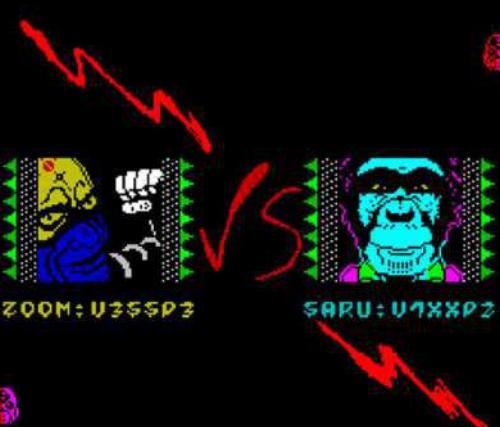
“2 fine young chaps, Iadvd and Molomazo, one day thought up the thing we know as Furillo.
They couldn’t half make nice graphical creations and no-one could say they lacked imagination.
So they made a space game called *Federation Z*, which had plenty of space and was sick in the head.
Flappy Clive followed, a tribute quite silly, which Sir C. liked even more than *Jet Set F***ing Willy*.
Their shining moment came with *Doom Of The Pond*, of which the Crash boys were deeply fond,
And they gave it a Smash for its looks and its sounds, even though you got killed every couple of rounds.
Next came *Yopparai Sarariiman*, the strangest of things. Is he from Japanese Lord Of The Rings?
Then *Fed. Underwater* dragged us into the deep, with plenty of dad jokes designed to make you weep.
A shooter called *Deva* was next in the list, where you tried not to get your chakras in a twist.
Then *The Void Bringer* appeared, for better or worse, which I promise I’ll get back to right after this verse.
Wallachia’s Demons brought platformy fare, a Hammer of Horror for the brave to bear.
Dark Veil and *Javi vs. Parrish* were good, if you missed ‘em. Short but sweet usages of the MuCho system.
Then *Area 51* took us to the land of New Mexico, to battle green aliens and boldly to go.
The last to date was *Pirate Captain Creed*, which I’ve not played but looks decent indeed.
So hail to those fine furry Furillo fellows! May they only get crazier and never ever mellow.
Their games are always odd but never boring. And they clearly are very good with the drawing.
Let them continue their ascent to goodness, as what would life be without its share of oddness?”

Well that’ll be divisive but I had a few spare minutes to amuse myself, so there you go. Let’s check out *The Void Bringer* then. After the optical illusion style loading screen, we get a big screen of text which reminds me a little of some of Philip K. Dick’s short sci-fi stories, or maybe the best short story of all time, “I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream” by Harlan Ellison. It’s quite creepy really, and a weird kind of atmosphere is duly generated. Next a huge gob harangues you, like getting far too close to an angry Mick Jagger. And then an ugly marionette’s head has its twopenneth as well. It’s all quite unsettling actually. Have a read of it on the screenshot probably, there’s not much point me repeating it here, lazy boy that I am.



Let's hope TV in the dystopian post-apocalyptic future is as random as this

Bowlhead Jane is not amused. You can stick your stinkin' almond water!



Game very much over, man. Game very much over...

This DLC for Future Games is quite decent actually



So you're stuck in the back rooms and must urgently return to the front rooms. Maybe the sun was coming in strong and it was getting a bit much? Or maybe your back rooms are junk rooms and you don't want your family seeing that you're a messy slob. It's a studenty type of problem and in order to go from back to front, you have to beat the stuffing out of 5 people who are stuck in the same back rooms as you, squatters probably.

Your opponents are *Saru* (an educated ape), *Rika* (a lady explorer researching almond water?!), *Xags* (a 10,000 year old A.I.), *Zoom* (a retired superhero from Earth), *Jane* (a soldierette serving in Guyana) and *ZZ80* (a neural network descended from the Z80, who looks like Billie Eilish). The randomness of these protagonists cannot be understated. You have to beat them over five different rounds of varying strangeness, like *It's A Knockout* used to be before it got cancelled because everyone involved in it was dodgy. These rounds come up in a random order, but I'll tackle them in the order they came up for me last time round.

Round 1 – “Energy Up”. Remember that fairly short-lived Saturday night family TV show “*Hole In The Wall*” with the varnished Dale Winton? Apologies to non-UK readers, but you can be glad you didn't have to see it. A person would have to throw themselves through said holes in said walls as they came towards them, otherwise the wall would smush them flat. This is like a spacey version of that - you have to guide your ship through the one character hole as it travels upwards. This would be easy, only I'm sure they've nobbled the controls so that you have to press your keys about five times as often as usual to move your craft even one space. While your opponent sails through untroubled. Didn't like this one much if I'm honest.

Round 2 – “Doppelgangers”. More mundane territory now, this is a simple game of Pairs. The players' ugly mugs appear when the cards are turned over, and you have to use “the power of the mind” to remember where their mates are. Like an intergalactic version of the game you used to play with your nan. Strangely, the computer is terrible at this game, so must be going senile. You could, nay should, win it comfortably.

Round 3 – “The Labyrinth”. You move your little UDG around as fast as you can, uncovering bits of a maze which were previously engulfed in darkness. Uncover more than your opponent does and beat their score and you win. This game features power-ups and almond water, as all the best games do, and is well balanced. Concentrate and you'll win, but start slacking and your intergalactic bottom will be handed to you.

Round 4 – “The Sun Eater”. Not the permanently half-dressed lady who sang “*So Macho*” before attaching herself to Simon Cowell (urgh). No, rather you're back in your spaceship and must zap the various suns which appear before your opponent does, while trying to avoid getting sucked into black holes. This is another winnable affair as your opponent tends to be handy, and the ‘getting sucked into the black holes’ bit works pretty well, giving you a realistic sucking sensation. Stop that. Sometimes your cross-hair is too small for shooting the bigger suns for some reason, which is a bit rum but no doubt there's a reason for it.

Round 5 – “The Duel”. A colourful little number with you on one side of the screen and your enemy on the other. You ride in a cute li'l ship, firing blocks at them and trying to avoid their blocks being fired at you. You can't see your bullets on your own side, only on theirs. Weird, but quite fun and again, quite winnable.

If you win overall, the comfy couch in the front room is yours! And if you lose, the game takes great delight in informing you that you're going to be dissected slowly and painfully for being such a useless tosser. Seriously *Furillos*, this is some sick s**t. It should be mentioned that you can play this game with two players, which I imagine would make for a lively experience, especially if you're both completely hammered at the time. “Haha, you got dissected slowly and painfully! Ner ner!” I can see how that could be fun.

Presentation overall is great graphically and sonically. So this one has been a hugely entertaining *Curiosity* I have to say. What it lacks in arcade quality it gains in overall presentation and atmosphere, and is nothing but fun to have a go of. I'd like to see *Crash* review this one actually, see what they make of it, but for now I'm off to enjoy some delicious almond water before I get dissected slowly and painfully. Goodnight!



It's awake Richard Burton vs. sleeping Hitler. Who's gonna win?



Here's how WWI started. The arcade shooty bit is impossible btw



Flirting with 'pretty' nurse is 'pretty' embarrassing. But better than war



Don't forget to "throw grenade CAREFULLY" or you'll never hit anything



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: W

THE WORLD WAR SIMULATOR: PARTS 1 & 2

(Retrobytes, 2012 & 2018)

Simulation is a tricky business. I recall attempting to make sense of Psion's Flight Simulation as one of the first games I experienced on the Spectrum. I wasn't very good at it, it was just too darned realistic. I don't know how to fly a plane, it's not a reasonable expectation. I'd only just got my head around Space Raiders at that point.

But if you were a more chilled-out sort of a teenager back then (or more likely the dad of same) and had the patience, you could fly all manner of planes, trains and automobiles from the safety of your own dead fleshed wonder. Or even submarines or bobsleighs. It wouldn't be fun, but it would probably be quite realistic and slow if that's your bag.

Then along came those cheeky Masters Of The Code, the Darjeelings. To them, everything was a simulation, such was their tenuous grip on reality. Did prodding a few buttons really give you the same sensation as riding a BMX into a tree, skiing headlong into a tree or watching your ATV fly crazily through the air and land... in a tree? Cracking games they may well have been, but frankly they were all grossly mislabelled and corrective action should have been taken by the appropriate authority.

Such irresponsible behaviour opened up the floodgates to the real jokers. Ninja Scooter Simulator. Spaghetti Western Simulator. Werewolf Simulator (which was a GAC adventure F.F.S.). Advanced Lawnmower Simulator. Alright, you can have that one, it is a classic. Some claimed to be Professional, some were supposedly Advanced in some way. But practically none were what they purported to be. We shouldn't have stood for it, but shamefully we allowed it to happen on our watch, in plain sight, and for that we should all be sore ashamed.

Despite this historical outrage, here are two games which profess to 'simulate' the joys of a world war. Not too sure I want that experience really, it doesn't sound tempting from what I've heard about them. I think there's an element of black humour here possibly, which to be fair is what has prompted my interest in these games for this feature. So in the lingo of those Darlings, will they prove "unbelievably realistic!" or "incredibly depressing and tragic!"?

Alejandro Layunta Villarejo is da man behind parts 1 and 2 of WW Sim, or WWI and WWII if you prefer. He also gave us Fist-Ro Fighter, which I've meant to check out for ages now, the colourful Tales Of Grupp and ZX Destroyer, of which more might well be heard soonish on these pages. He seems to do a nice line in colourful chunky graphics, so that bodes well here, as most wars could use a bit more pretty colour about them, they tend to be such dismal affairs.



If this Nazi nabs you, he'll subject you to the terrors of "the comfy chair"

Now onto WWII. First negotiate the mines. Erm, not like that...



There's the first one to murder. You literally have to stand next to them and shoot them while they sleep. Gulp

And the winner of the "Most Outrageous Bedclothes in a Video Game" goes to...



Both games are quite different actually. Starting with **Part 1**, what we have here, ladies, is one of those adventures involving them there graphics. Your aim is to not die and probably persuade some of the enemy to do the opposite. You get a nice little picture and some commands to ponder in every location (a small trench, a large trench, a gloomy, empty trench with dreary hills ahead). You need various objects to aid in your warring, including obtaining a pair of scissors from a nurse by means of ludicrously drawn-out and cringey flirting. Don't these people know there's a war on?

One kinda simulatory aspect is that while you're deciding what to do and whether to dash foolishly north to your doom or bravely retreat south, there's a frequent bombardment going on around you, which saps your health unhelpfully, flashes your borders and stresses you out generally. Maybe this is a more realistic experience than I'd initially imagined. As a result what the game lacks in length, it makes up for in trickiness, and is a fairly unusual adventuring experience on the whole. Just remember there's no shame in running away like a coward and getting court marshalled. It sure beats a landmine taking your sight, taking your speech, taking your hearing, taking your arms, taking your legs, taking your soul and leaving you with life in **He-eellllllll**.

Now onto Part 2, which is a different kettle of fish (or corned beef, this being wartime). Think **Into The Eagle's Nest** and you won't be far wrong. You play **Richard Burton** rather surprisingly, a la *The Great Escape* perhaps. Hang on, was he in that? Okay, no. How about *Where Eagles Dare* instead? Anyway, the dour Welshman must infiltrate Adolf's bunker and kill him in his sleep. Together with his bird Eva, all his lieutenants and even a Nazi dog (sorry pooch, but you shouldn'tta oughta have signed up to the war effort).

This is rather more fun than war ought to be. You have to use some strategy and save as much ammo as you can in order to get around the complex efficiently, and find all the keys to all the doors. But the nasty Nazis are quite good shots, so this proves tricky. And the game unreasonably won't let you dig your bullets out of their mangled corpses in order to re-use them. But there are plenty of screens of colourful heroic fun to enjoy and it's nicely addictive stuff. The high point is seeing the Nazis' lovely **bedclothes** resplendent with swastikas. Ahhhh, bless their murderous cotton socks!

So it seems that despite **James Brown**'s insistent querying on the subject, war is actually good for something. For making pretty good Speccy games, that's what. If we could get a third chapter for *WW3* where you have to scour a post nuclear wasteland where we've all got radiated to bits, then that would be great too. Erm, wouldn't it?? Maybe it's best that some things aren't simulated too realistically.



I'm totally converted to these guys' weird cult. Take all my money now!

Stare into this for 3 minutes and become a happy Xenoxxx minion, like we all are. Join us...



The gang win a vacation at the Interdimensional Space Hotel! Dave has reservations...

A trailer for 2001: The Animated Series, with some classic 'hotel' humour

Ah, the game itself! We're near the bottom left ogling some floor goujons



*Held closed by air pressure.
DB-A: Image restored from cache.
DB-A: Goujons.*

A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: X

XENOXXX FUNTIME SHOW

(*Arbitrary Files*, 2018)

*Part of the reason why I enjoy doing these alphabetical features is that I like to go above and beyond in the field of finding obscure stuff to check out and comment on. Anyone can find a game that begins with 'S' (like duh... erm...), but finding a modern one starting with an 'X' is more my kind of challenge. For a while things looked grim, I won't lie to you, but then from out of the dry ice, a la Stars In Their Eyes or a Sisters Of Mercy gig, strode **Xenoxxx Funtime Show**. If a game can indeed stride. This one is more likely to adopt a Silly Walk that would put John Cleese to shame.*

*I thought at first this might have been off of one of those yearly tape thingies, whose name eludes me for now. They usually have little fun and sometimes funny segments, choc-ful of in-jokes, mostly about good old Clive Sinclair. But no, this one comes courtesy of the mysterious **Arbitrary Files**, whose only other title is *Super Enquiry Simulator*, of which more later. It's by David Walford, as is S.E.S., but also by someone called Paul Rose. The peerless Spectrum Computing advises me that *Xenoxxx Funtime Show* is based on something on YouTube called **Mr. Biffo's Found Files**. Obscurer and obscurer, we'll be performing a quirkafleeg before we know it, if we're not careful.*

*I like to go off at a tangent, so it seems that before playing the game properly, I should check out this Biffo business. It seems it's nothing to do with our binmen round here, it's actually a series of comedy shows made by Paul "Mr. Biffo" Rose himself. Watch the first one and some crazy American guy called Goujon John, who can't pronounce 'goujons' properly, is forcing me to buy his merchandise even though it "tastes baaaaaaaaad". Then an advert for Roaming Thomas, a sort of psychotic Roomba. Episode 2 introduces us to the Ghee Lord, a He-Man lookalike with too-short shorts (by far, seriously, you'd have to see it) who's into making curries I think, then later an episode of Improve My Tarp based on Noughties Fun-For-Five-Minutes cult TV classic *Pimp My Ride*.*

*Alright, none of it sounds even slightly funny when I say it, but I can assure you that this is some funny, effed-up poop (damn this language censor). When it hits, it really hits hard, and there's so very much anarchic fun to watch, it's criminal really. I'd restrict yourself to watching no more than a couple a day, otherwise you risk terminal brain injury, but viewing it in moderation can definitely restore your faith in existence. If you're into mad, sick things naturally. It's reminiscent of '90s cult icon **Victor Lewis-Smith**'s style – fast, surreal, often disturbing but never dull, original comedy stylings. It's not Michael McIntyre. It eats Michael McIntyre's smug face off while joyously spitting out bits of goujon in his torn-off fizzog.*



BLARING

Another future presentation, Coalface Inc. Netflix have snapped up the first season

Cranetron-5000 demonstrates his offputting partypiece



What's that, Coalface? You've already disposed of the bodies?



Another youth braves the vortex of Lord Brannigan-7.

Looks like someone's having a nightmare about Nightmare



I will personally ensure that your form reaches Decisions.

Unfortunately, I am not authorised to view their records.

Do you have their number?

In Super Enquiry Simulator, our hero's house is suffering while he tries to progress his claim

Oh, well it seems like I'm massively late to the Mr Biffo train, as he did various teletext based content back in the '90s and has been a cult figure (yes I said cult) for decades now. Ah well, better late than never. It seems recently he and his missus have got into spoofy conspiracy theory type documentaries, as there are plenty of those on his YouTube channel to boot. I watched one and can report it was "top notch" and has convinced me that the Illuminati really do run the UK from their base at Milton Keynes. He reminds me of Charlie Brooker somewhat, when he was young, peed off and hadn't yet stared into, and subsequently got trapped within, the Black Mirror.

And even for me, that has to be the longest I've ever gone on without actually starting to talk about the game proper. Five paragraphs, are ya proud of me? Okay then, so XenoXXX Funtime Show is a two-pronged attack on all that is good and reasonable. The first is effectively a messed-up slideshow full of in-jokes, but not prohibitively so. And the second is an odd maze game. If you happen to have the secret codes to access it, which thankfully are readily obtainable from the darkweb. I'll not say too much about this first bit bar my caption comments, as I don't want to spoil it for you, but suffice to say it's full of frivolous fun.

Once you've got the codes right, you can play the game proper. You are a small robot, possibly Roaming Thomas himself, and you must roam around a big maze finding a way out, as well as many a distinctly odd and un-useful thing. Like a dead XenoXXX soldier and a goujon, just to keep the chickeny theme going. It's futuristic, atmospheric (a little like the first Alien game) and generally infuriating, but it's really just an excuse to get in as many in-jokes as possible. Which is fine as most of the humour is pretty amusing. There's a long intro to this bit which resembles when you started up DOS on your '90s PC – a million and one bizarre messages about "installing" this and "preparing" that. The funometer duly reads "fun".

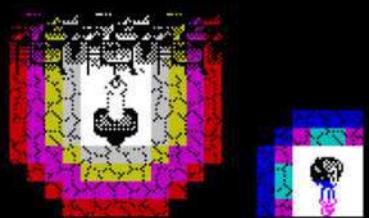
A quick word about Super Enquiry Simulator now. You have sent a form to a large organisation and are chasing up its progress, you know the kind of thing. Needless to say, getting anywhere proves taxing and involves a LOT of phone conversations, nearly all of which make suicide seem increasingly attractive. You can play it in 'arcade' mode or 'simulation' mode, i.e. real-time waiting, which the inlay describes as "needlessly prolonged and unfair." It's highly repetitive as befits the subject matter, but if you do try attempting this game, do persevere, as things eventually come to a fairly disturbing, supernatural outcome. Nuff said.

So in conclusion, although XenoXXX Funtime Show is not really a proper game as such, I have found it to be a quirky, fun-packed gateway to a whole new exciting world of Biffo-ness which promises to keep me entertained for quite some time. And for that I thank it (besides, Lord XenoXXX will have me strung up for faithlessness if I don't. Hail XenoXXX! (nervous laughter))



*Don't upset the giant noseless girl,
whatever you do*

*Yup, it's pretty dark. She can hardly
see beyond her nose, if she had one*



*No need to look so horrified Yumiko,
this map's really useful*

*The flashing lightning reveals a
phantom menace too close for comfort*



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: Y

YUMIKO IN THE HAUNTED MANSION

(*Fun Forge, 2012*)

Darkness. Horror. Suspense. Anxiety. New pants. A fair number of survival horror games over the past few decades have revelled in the joys of putting not much on the screen. *Silent Hill*, *Resident Evil* and especially the *Amnesia* series of games loved nothing more than plunging you into darkness at an inconvenient moment, and sometimes for a long spell. When done well, it can be an effective way of terrifying the player and saving on graphics, which can put their feet up and have a rest while the programmer goes through their repertoire of BBC Sound Department horror movie effects. Easy, programming, isn't it?

This phenomenon (who let those Muppets in?) wasn't really a thing back in the Spectral '80s though as far as I can recall. I suppose *Alien* by Argus Press was dark-ish, and it was fairly scary when the green bulbous-headed one suddenly popped onto the screen. Maybe not quite as gulpworthy as in *Alien Isolation* decades later, mind, but not bad for the time. There have been a couple of more recent Speccy games which have employed darkness as a game mechanic though, and I'm going to tell you all about them in the next paragraph, once I've stopped for a brew.

Ah, that's better. So in 2013 those pesky Mojon Twins gave us *Tenebra Macabre*, an ordinary looking platformer, one might think, but not so. The lights regularly go on and off and muck up your jumps worse than going lupine in *Knight Lore*, causing you to land embarrassingly on spikes and spooks alike. It's both clever and annoying all at once. And in 2020, RetroWorks released *The Lost Treasures Of Tulum*, where your li'l explorer edged his way through various caverns bit by bit, as his torch only illuminated a small amount at a time. Another cunning twist on the theme of falling over things in the dark, but more fun than when that happens in real life. I fell over a suitcase once at uni in such circs, bashing my face a bit, after perhaps a snakebite or two too many.

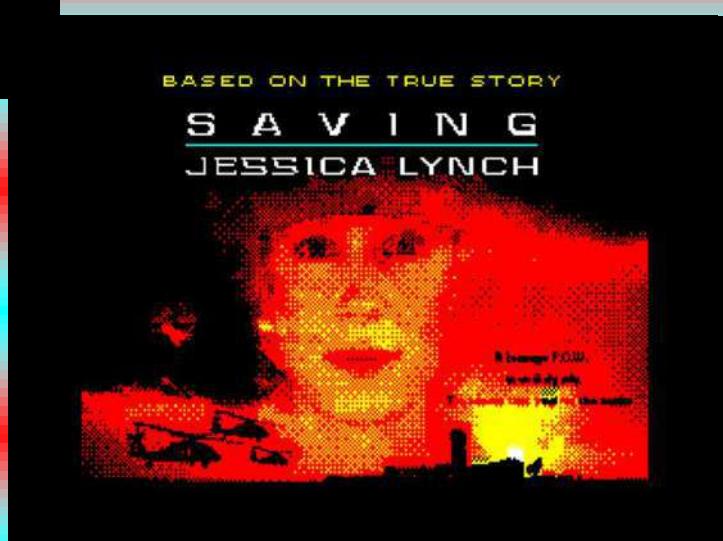
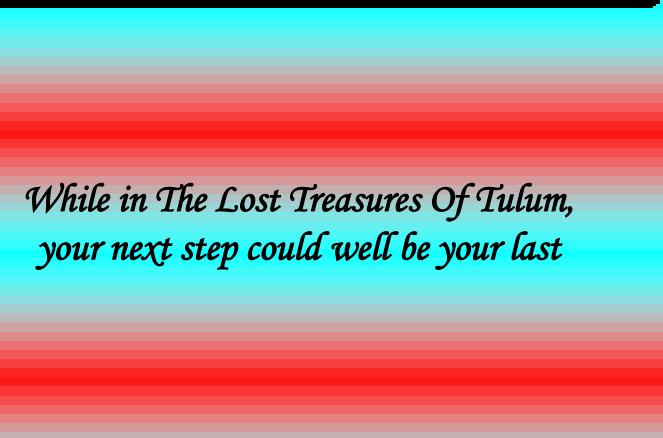
In 2012, the fun-sounding Fun Forge released *Yumiko In The Haunted Mansion*, made by Leszek Chmielewski Daniel from Austria, with music by our old friend Yerzmyey. He seems to have made a large number of puzzle games over the years, including *Quest for Witchcraft* (a previous Curiosity of the Modern Age, no less), the 'probably not as dodgy/interesting as it sounds' *Pussy: Love Story From Titanic*, and self-styled 'crap game' *Saving Jessica Lynch*. That one was an adventure for a change, which was entered in 2012's C.S.S.C.G.C., where it was up against such indisputable classics as Alan Partridge's *Traffic Cone Dash*, David Blaine's *Binge Bonanza* and Bros: *The Music Box*. No idea how it did.



Here's Tenebra Macabre, in a brief flash of illumination



This sort of thing is far too good for a 'Crap Games Competition' surely...



And it's in Boriel BASIC. Boriel is an open-source BASIC compiler (thanks internet), which is presumably ace at making your games less slow and clunky, and hopefully works better than most '80s compilers seemed to do. It must work pretty darn well as this game certainly moves faster than *The Oracle's Cave* and *Football Manager* put together, classics both of ye olde arte of BASIC(e).

Poor Yumiko and her parents were driving along in their automobile (diddly diddly doo da doo) when they had an unwanted crash smash and had no choice but to stay overnight in a big, spooky mansion. It's happened to us all at some point. Her folks switched off the bedroom lights for the night, then were rudely taken hostage by a phantom called *Yami*. In her room, Yumiko still had her lights on, but heard all the kerfuffle, so her mission to avoid becoming an orphan begins!

She must simply light all the magic candles in all the many rooms of the house, one at a time, to pee Yami off royally. The place is haunted generally so other ghosts mill around the place snuffing some of the candles out, then tittering annoyingly. There's a time limit and 32 levels of the mansion to illuminate, so she's got her work cut out for her, the poor little anime gal (i.e. she has no nose).

These days frequently the best thing about many a Speccy game will be the music. It's amazing what can be achieved and just what a difference it can make to any gaming experience. It's understandable that games ain't quite what they used to be – people aren't getting paid to make them any more, it's purely for the love of it – but areas like sound and graphics still often prove to be as impressive as ever. And the music in this game is fantastic – quirky, spooky and quite varied as you go through the levels. We're lucky that we're seeing (okay, hearing) the absolute best that the machine has ever had to offer in this respect.

And the game's not bad either. We've got some nice big graphics and a decent amount of colour, given the gloominess of your average haunted house, and it's quite playable too. You can call up a map at any point helpfully, on easy level at least, as otherwise things get a bit too frustrating. Helpful objects can be found here and there, and suddenly seeing a ghost near you from time to time can come as a bit of a shock. Though they're generally not too bloodthirsty, just a bit disconcerting. Although when they blow out a candle which will take you an absolute age to get back to, negotiating narrow mazes of corridors all the while, you'll want to roast them alive.

There are plenty of options to ramp up the difficulty level, all the way to 'madness' if you really want to, which means fewer map viewing opportunities and more vicious ghosties. This helps in making things more frenzied, but ultimately at the cost of playability in my humble opinion. No matter, it's nice to have the option. On the whole *Yumiko In The Haunted Mansion* is not bad to have a whirl on, as it's not often you get to play a game that begins with 'Y' is it? I'll leave you to think on that one, and no, you can't have *Yie Ar Kung Fu*, I thought of that first.



You are about to wreck that TV with
a rock, Ooh, expensive...

Our hero surveys the city, which looks
like a level of Bomber (or Fungaloids
on a ZX81)



The mad red needler has knocked you
(cyan) flying downwards. Never
should have given blood

Here's a handy guide to Ziona living,
hope you can remember all of this



A-Z of Curiosities of the Modern Age: Z

ZIONA QUEST

(IAMAI Creation, 2023)

A lot of games made nowadays follow the well-trodden path of Jet Set Willy, and there's nothing wrong with that. But imagine if Matthew Smith had somehow been able to copyright that type of game, the money he'd have made! But unfortunately for him, the profits from J.S.F.W. pretty much got absorbed within Software Projects, which he was a director of at the time. Such is business I guess. But anyway, instead of me having to review another J.S.W. clone, it's highly refreshing to see a one-screen-at-a-time platformer instead, maybe going down more of a Manic Miner route, but with more than a few different tweaks.

Ziona Quest was made by 'Oor' Willie from Edinburgh! Otherwise known as IAMAI Creation, this seems to be his first game, but he followed it up quickly with a Chrimble offering, Psyco Santa, which has a similar look to this one, but with more snow on it. Talking of snow, visually this game reminds me of that early Quicksilva classic(ish) The Snowman. Haven't played that in eons, but the blue lifts in Z.Q. are quite reminiscent of those in Aled Jones' game.

Do you want to hear the plot? And boy, is there a plot! And some of it may seem eerily familiar, one could say. It's dystopian future time, 2039, and "the world is awash with fear as deluded overlords unleash chaos in an attempt to save themselves from an incoming phoenix event." Now I assume that's not a good thing, but phoenixes (oh yeah) generally come back from the dead, which is beneficial surely. In Final Fantasy anyway. Hang on, let's get back to the blurb...

"The Earth's inhabitants, locked down in smart cities pacified by a merciless barrage of mockingbird media, are in trouble. The call went out for brave souls to come help humanity free themselves and ring in a new age of peace and prosperity... You answered." No I didn't, but given the circumstances, I suppose I could lend a hand in the form of pootling around on a 40 year old home computer if that's any help at all?



"You can't handle my truth bombs" -
now we've got a magenta fighter and a
green freaker. Standard

Get away from it all and meditate
(yellow). Erm, quickly if you can



Here's Psyko Santa, keen to ruin your
Xmas again by zapping you. You suck,
Santa!

Oh look, your brother's appeared (blue).
Shoot him lots with arrows obviously



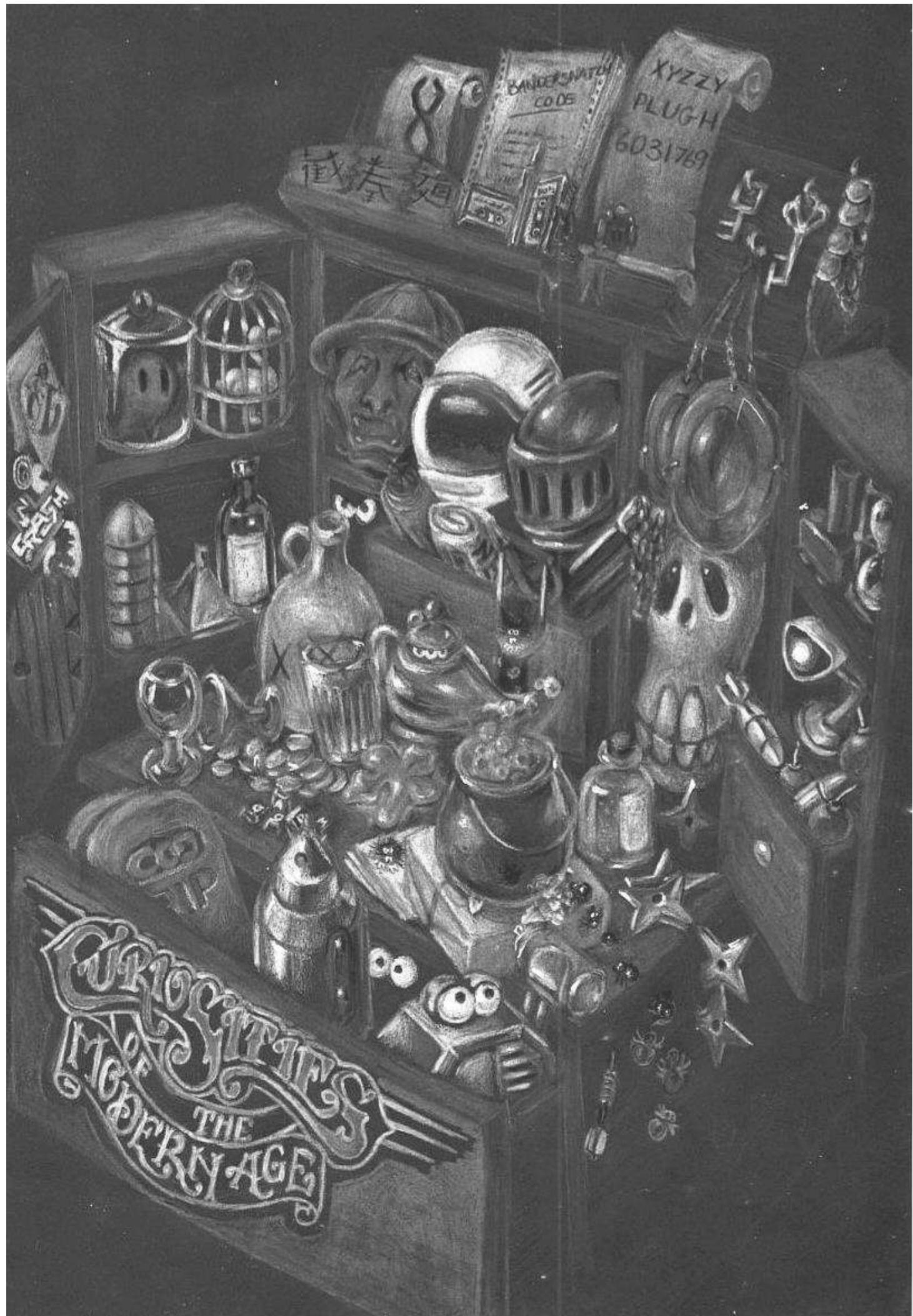
*So it's heavy stuff, with more than "a little bit of politics" as Ben Elton used to say centuries ago. Well, you ain't seen nothing yet. Here's what you have to do on each screen in order to complete the level. Collect a rock from the rock shop, throw it at a TV (someone's gonna be p****d), collect the TV core, then deliver it to the temple. Do this three times and you gain a 'truth bomb'. With me so far? Really? Okay, now onto the next phase. Drop the truth bombs in the path of the 3 humans who are wandering around aimlessly. They'll react either by going purple and angrily running at you, or turning green, freaking out and flying around the place somehow. Merely shoot them with arrows to calm them down, then try to guide these 'wakened' individuals to the temple at the top left. Which I don't think has swastikas on it, god I hope I'm right in that...*

Once you've saved the souls of those 3 humans, you have to take out 2 'needlers' who are marauding around the place, by shooting them about 10 times. At the same time, your 'brother' escapes the 'monarch beam' he's been held in and if you shoot him till he's golden (sounds inadvisable, but that's what it says) he'll give you a golden rock, which you can lob at needlers if you like, or take it to the temple for an extra life. Obvious really innit? Get to the chopper, sorry flashing temple anyway in order to finish the level, preferably before the sun has made its way across the screen to settle over the temple, or you die. Phew.

This might all sound insane, but you've got to admire the level of thought behind it. Oor Willie has managed to pack all of this weirdness onto just one Spectrum screen at a time, which is quite an achievement. Once you've got your head around what on earth you're trying to do and when, it'll probably take around ten minutes or so to complete each level. If one of the dreaded needlers jabs you, you die immediately, or possibly get immunized from Covid, but you can at least shoot them too. Oh and if you lose some health from contact with the meandering citizens, you can just stop, meditate and get it back again. Omoooooooooooo.

Considering just how many things have to be fitted onto the screen, the graphics are great here. Nicely animated, small and neat, and smooth as you like. The screens don't lack for colour, and there's some great music from someone or something called N.Q. to boot. It's playable once you've identified your next mini-quest, and the difficulty level seems spot-on. It's quite inspired to incorporate all the different features into a humble platformer too.

I didn't expect very much when I spotted this title, but thought since my options for letter Z weren't likely to be plentiful, I'd go with it. And aren't I glad I did, as Ziona Quest is as much fun as you could hope to have with a modern Speccy game, so why not give it a whirl? I just hope I haven't unwittingly joined a cult or got brainwashed by playing it. Anyway I'm off now to vote for Donald Trump, laters!



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THE
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